

**THE CHARGER CHRONICLES**

**CHARGER THE GOD**



**BOOK 3**

# **CHARGER THE GOD**

**(Charger Chronicles - Book 3)**

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Publisher: Felinity Press

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**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

Grateful thanks to all those people who helped me to make this novel better: Leanne Allen, Anna Becker, Laura Langston, Phil Sutton and, most of all, my science guy.

Millions long for immortality who don't know what to do with themselves on a rainy Sunday afternoon. (Susan Ertz)

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## Chapter 1 Dart speaks to Reader

I hope you're ready for the third and final instalment of humanity's history, Reader. Do you remember how the second instalment ended?

That's right. Charger R/T, the First Ones, and the black sphere god were captured in a time-lock in the year 2640 CE.

Yes, I know this is 4800 CE, and we still have a little more than two thousand years of history to cover. And not much time in which to do it. Charger figures the giants will attack within a couple of days. So I'm going to skip the first thousand years.

Didn't anything happen then?

You'll find it hard to believe, but humanity was actually at peace for all those years. There were tremendous scientific advances, though. And the original black hollow planet, Neo Terra, once used as a world ship, was made to orbit New Eden, just like a moon. Fantastic cities rose skyward, inhabited by thriving humans finally safe from the villainous Grays and the malevolent black sphere god.

The advances in science really were fantastic. Long ago, when humans discovered the Higgs boson in what was called a super collider, they began to realize that other types of particles should exist. These became known as exotic particles. Because everything in the universe is made of elements, such as gold, silver, and oxygen, the exotic particles had to be elements, too.

These particles couldn't be seen but, through mathematics, we knew they had to be there. What we found was truly revolutionary, for the new particles turned out to be linked to elements we already knew. Sort of like anti-gold, or anti-oxygen. We found anti-gravity elements, and eventually, anti-aging elements.

Yes, Reader, those anti-aging elements are the reason I'm well over a thousand years old.

With these discoveries, we realized that we could create anything, and I do mean anything. We could repair oceans, soil, and air, and even recreate life. To people from the twentieth century or even later, what we did would have seemed like magic.

Try to imagine you're a cave man, and you meet a person who makes gold rings from rocks. To you, this is pure magic, because the best you can do is bang the rocks together and maybe chip off a piece here and there.

It's just that we understand things better scientifically. But humanity itself didn't change much. We were always a brutish, savage, loving species capable of amazing good as well as tremendous evil. We could be disciplined, faithful, and honorable but, for all that, we were still vulnerable to our baser instincts.

People have always wondered what other species live out there in space. We knew about the Grays, but we mistakenly thought their society had self-destructed. So we went exploring and discovered a third race of beings. They were quite weird.

Well, imagine a water world. Now remove the water and replace it with formamide. Formamide is basically a clear liquid produced from formic acid, and it stinks horribly. These beings, like a combination of fish and bird, flew around their planet's surface, going to work and playing games, much as humans did.

But they were enormous, their young the size of dinosaurs. Their world was massive, too. Every couple of years, their world would get really hot, up to 180 degrees Centigrade. This caused the formamide to turn into carbon monoxide and ammonia, and that's when these crazy-looking fish/bird things developed legs and walked around. There was hard land beneath the

liquid. They appeared to communicate with one another, and they did build homes to live in, and farmed some sick-looking jelly things.

Yeah, it was gross to watch them eat those.

Scientists decided the best way to interact with these things was to become them, so a team of people altered their bodies to look like these creatures. It was nearly two years before the team returned and gave their report. The information was quite unsettling. I won't even try to describe their sex life. We decided to wait a bit longer before trying to make friends with them. The plan was to return when they were more technologically prepared to understand us.

Is Charger going to be in this part of the story?

Oh, very much so! You do remember he's called Charger R/T now? The original Charger died on Neo Terra, in flames, and was buried there. But later, the Prime Taskoid collected his remains, resurrected him, and called him Charger R/T.

R/T stands for 'resurrected terminus.'

Yes, the 'living dead.'

Are you scared yet, Reader?

No? Oh, I see, you still think he's a hero. Well, let's get started on the story.

It's the year 3640 CE and in the largest city on New Eden stands a crumbling statue from an almost forgotten time in the past. Though people no longer remember why it's there, they believe this remarkable statue should be maintained. Construction crews led by Abarth, the project manager, will move the statue in order to rebuild the crumbling foundation. And, in so doing, discover a device of alien design and unknown origin buried deep beneath it.

What do you suppose will happen when they open Pandora's Box?

## Chapter 2 Abarth meets Charger R/T

New Eden was a beautiful world, where the sun almost always shone from a clear blue sky. It was a wonderful time in humanity's existence, too, for everyone had plenty of food and good-paying work and there were no conflicts anywhere on the planet. High education standards meant that every graduate was ready to endure the rigors of adult life. There were no unwanted or unprepared children. Because so many humans had been destroyed, the value of life was finally fully appreciated. Cities were beautiful because humanity had finally learned to blend construction with nature and to avoid ugly giant blocks of concrete. The waters were clean, the air crisp and fresh. Technological improvements in industry were the norm, and the old belief that there were things humanity could not do now seemed foolish.

Some old city areas, however, were ragged and rundown. In the great city of Eur, in the district known as Old Town, was a small lake with a little island in the center, on which stood gushing fountains. From the four points of the compass, walkways with bridges led foot traffic to this island. The central feature was a statue, so old that few knew why it had been built.

Today, project engineers were assessing the stability of this statue, which stood more than twenty meters high and leaned precariously to the right. The only word that could still be made out at the base was 'peace.' The statue had the shape of a man, but twisted and contorted, with beastly attributes, assumed to be like this because of weathering and decay. It looked like an evil specter, not a hero.

Abarth stood with a computer device in hand, facing the statue and recording the size and stability of this massive structure of marble and granite.

"Can't say I've ever seen anything this ugly before," Dan said. He was a junior management type, with years of experience sitting behind a desk. This was his first time out in the field, actually doing structural engineering, and the only comment he could come up with concerned appearance.

"Our job is not to evaluate the artist, but to support the project in its original incarnation," snapped Abarth, his temper always quick to rise. He could count the number of friends he had on both thumbs. People resented his smug, arrogant attitude.

"I'm sorry, sir, I didn't mean to judge," Dan said soberly. "Do you suspect the soil conditions are failing and this is the reason for the lean?" He hoped to portray a sense of true commitment and interest.

"The soil is fine, and the base clearly correct, but I am detecting a small void or pocket a meter or so below the west corner that seems to be failing. That is the reason for the lean! With a couple of anti-gravs hooked to the sides, we can have a pump crew fill in the failing area." As Abarth pointed to the locations on the statue where he wanted the anti-gravity devices to be attached, his computer beeped a warning.

Computers had, by this time, achieved limited awareness. Abarth's computer was warning the two men about something in the void.

Abarth stared at the small screen floating in the air before him and scowled. "Odd, there seems to be something in that cavity. We'd better have a crew excavate it first. I will have a team here tomorrow."

"Good idea, sir," responded Dan eagerly.

The two men returned to their hotel for the night and Abarth headed straight to the bar. He quickly drank himself into oblivion, ignoring the disgusted reactions of the patrons around him.

Near closing time, he dragged his inebriated carcass to his room and, not bothering to undress, passed out on the bed.

Life on New Eden may have been a pleasure for everyone else, but not for Abarth. In the morning, he awoke to his computer encouraging him to rise. It laid out the day's events from the calendar program, sounding like a mother prepping a child for school. During the night, microscopic nanobots in the ventilation system had circulated, cleaning and repairing all the surfaces. Abarth's clothing was refreshed, the smells of alcohol and the stains of the night's drinking removed. As Abarth stumbled into the kitchen, the computer prepared a list of available food, which Abarth instantly rejected. He used a sonic brush to clean his teeth and headed downstairs to the lobby.

Dan waited patiently near the front door. When he saw Abarth, he tried to portray a sincere concern by asking how his boss had spent the evening.

"Shut the hell up and get in the vehicle," snapped Abarth. His head hurt.

Dan had come from a well-to-do family and found it difficult to tolerate Abarth's insulting behavior but, rather than react, he bottled up his dislike for the man.

What made Abarth so miserable? His wife and three daughters had undergone the now common molecular gene therapy, a technology to extend the human life span. But the therapy went wrong. He watched as his wife and three girls aged to their deaths within four months, helpless to stop the mutating molecules. He'd had four months of listening to cries of agony from his little girls, and his wife's pleas to stop the suffering.

Though the death of his family was in itself devastating, Abarth was further embittered because he had been unable to get any satisfaction from the medical practitioners. Medicine now held out the possibility of near immortality to all and, because the courts had decreed that the benefits to mankind outweighed any risk of death, the medical community was unaccountable to the law.

At first, Abarth merely wallowed alone in his grief. Eventually it came to him that the people of his time were stupid and frustrating. They had grown fat, lazy, and willing to accept anything that came to them. They didn't fight anymore. As far as he could see, there was no will to improve, no will to innovate. They just accepted.

"I expect a coring crew to be at the site," Abarth said to Dan as he drove the vehicle to Old Town. "I want you to set up a perimeter barricade to keep tourists away from the west side of the base. I will have the crew start digging toward the void so we can determine what, if anything, exists in that cavity."

Abarth's commands were clear, and Dan agreed quickly and willingly.

"When you get that done, go into Old Town and get me a coffee," Abarth said. "Then call the office and tell them you don't have enough work to do with me, and request they give you a second shift."

Dan again willingly agreed.

Abarth pressed on with his demands, hoping that Dan would snap, fight back, and stand his ground. But, no matter how much Abarth dumped on Dan's back, he just took it. Finally, Abarth gave up in frustration. Dan didn't seem to have any idea that Abarth wanted him to fight back. That was the problem with the new humans, Abarth thought. They were all like Dan.

Efficient technology supported the enormous statue while the ground at the west corner of the base was being vaporized and, within minutes of starting the process, the void had been breached. Air hissed out as light fell on the interior, and a strange yellow glow emanated from deep within. The workers remarked on the strange feeling of static they were experiencing, but

Abarth dismissed it. He shouldered past the workers and moved into the interior. He didn't fear a possible cave-in, for the walls of the void were held firmly in place with a repulse field.

In the middle of the cavity sat an alien-looking device, like a box, and about half the height of the average person. Abarth carefully scanned the device and, sure from his readings that it posed no danger, he reached out to touch it. There was unknown writing on the surface. He carefully gauged the weight of the object by trying to tip it slightly, then called for two workers to help him remove the artifact.

To suggest that the object bonded with Abarth would be unrealistic, but it had been programmed long ago to respond to the first intelligent living organism that made contact with it. Now free from the confines of the cave, it was slowly reviving, emitting a yellow glow, and humming. Abarth felt like a scientist from thousands of years in the past, holding a clay pot. The writing on the object was a complete mystery and, though it was obviously a container, what was its function? Did it hold water, wine, rocks? Any guess was a good guess if one had no idea what it was for.

This alien device was a complete enigma. A team of specialists had been called to the site and they quickly established one fact. The object would stop functioning if more than a meter away from Abarth. Only when he was close by did the device emit the yellow glow and hum to life.

"Seems it likes you," one of the workers joked. Abarth was not amused.

A secure location was suggested, and a group of scientists drafted to work with Abarth in discovering the purpose of this alien device. "It has to be something our ancestors used, or had access to," Abarth commented to one of the lead scientists.

"What makes you believe that?" the scientist responded.

"It was buried beneath the statue, so must have been deliberately placed there." As Abarth replied, he practiced moving closer, then further from the device, testing the level of response to his presence.

"Not necessarily. That's guilt by association. For all we know, the object could always have been there, and the ancestors just built on top of it." The reasoning from the lead scientist was logical and the others there agreed with his assessment.

"I might agree with you, if not for the obvious," Abarth said coolly.

"And what would that be?" queried the scientist, irritated by Abarth's resistance to reason.

"First, you have no idea what you're talking about, and second, the engineer who erected this heavy statue had to make structural adaptations to the surrounding surface to support it. I can see that this cavity was man-made and, until the base began to crumble, it supported the statue above quite adequately." Abarth thus destroyed any chance of becoming friends with the scientists. To say what one thinks is always a difficult path for those that practice it, but Abarth didn't care.

"Again, I disagree with your assessment," retorted the scientist. "It may be true that the cavity was man-made, but there is little evidence to support the idea that humans placed the alien object in the cavity."

As humanity grew slowly away from its more primal side, those with intelligence applied reason and logic in almost every situation. No matter how much Abarth pushed people, they never snapped. Those individuals who took part in the molecular gene therapy program, and survived, were thought to be facing immortality, or close to it. This gave many a smug sense of false superiority and, though Abarth had survived the program, he now regretted being involved.

Since time was no longer very important, a year passed while the scientists poked and prodded Abarth, trying to unlock the secret of his mysterious connection to the strange object.

He grew more resentful and frustrated. "I have had just about enough of this!" snapped Abarth to one of the scientists. "This damn thing has done nothing and will obviously never do anything with all this dancing around and poking me!" He picked up a heavy tool and flung it at the alien device.

The device reacted immediately and Abarth was knocked flat by an unseen force. "Now that's a response!" growled Abarth as he regained his feet and proceeded to fire another, heavier tool at the device. Again, he was thrown to the ground by the unseen force.

"Is anyone measuring this? One of you guys should be trying to figure out this shit!" Abarth yelled at the scientific team. But they were too stunned to react. Abarth rose and this time gave the device a good shove, intending to knock it over.

The response was impressive. With the shove, the device started to tip over, then teetered a moment and landed firmly upright again. Abarth was thrown clear across the room and slammed into the wall, the wind knocked out of him. Gasping for air, he again retaliated, but this time the device emitted a force that froze him where he stood. An alien voice started speaking from the device, and small random lights erupted from the surface.

"Son of a bitch!" came from Abarth's mouth as if he were a ventriloquist's dummy. He was frozen so firmly that even his lips could not move.

The scientists were hurriedly trying to decipher the alien language and make sense of the powers involved. Suddenly everyone stopped moving, shocked into immobility. Then they checked the response from the computers twice.

There could be no mistake. The language was that of the Gray aliens from old history. Alarm bells rang out and staff poured into the room. A restraining field was quickly placed around the device, shutting it down and releasing Abarth. Humanity might have become passive, but the instinct for self-preservation hadn't waned.

Most of the Grays' technology was now considered primitive compared to that of modern humans, but the fact that this device had not been recognized as Gray property was alarming. With no understanding of its capabilities, the scientists now took even more extreme precautions.

But it was too late. This device was radically different from any Gray technology known to humans, for it had been one of the Grays' black projects, a forbidden knowledge that even the Grays in their prime rejected because of the danger it represented.

The process had begun. The time-lock was shutting down, releasing Charger R/T, the First Ones, and the black sphere god, locked in an endless battle, back into alignment with the present world of humanity.



#### **DART SPEAKS TO READER:**

Describe the time-lock? The easiest way is to compare it to a more primitive concept, religion. The time-lock is a layer of space akin to the concept of purgatory. It's a place where energy and mass exist but, because no time is present, cannot evolve. Like the mythical purgatory, anything caught in the time-lock is frozen in a timeless environment.

No, heaven is a myth, too. If it did exist, eternity would be a living hell. Being in heaven would be unending boredom for humans, a celestial wasteland where they could never touch, taste, love, or think for themselves.

You think it might be fun to live forever? Just stop and consider that in more detail. How many times could you go to the mall before it got old? How many times could you visit places before they all start to look the same? How much stuff could you gather before you realize you

have too much stuff? How many times could you stand to hear the same jokes and the same stories? Now try and imagine doing that forever.

That's immortality. When you don't have it, when your life is short, you wish you could live forever. But when your life is ridiculously long, you think, what is this all for? And how soon can I stop?

Like the time-lock? Yes, exactly.

If the black god had lived in such a heaven, it would probably think the time-lock was a perfect environment to control and thrive in.

You're right, Charger R/T wouldn't like that. With his active, twisted mind, existence in the time-lock would have been a nightmare for him.



The action began with wicked flashes of blue lightning racing across the floor from the device, a shuddering of the ground, and a cold frost forming in the air of the secure room. Authorities were put on high alert as the scientists tried desperately to contain the time-lock event. Unsure of what was happening, the city's task force, like the military units of history, sprang into action, sending heavy weapons and armor to the secure site. It was as if two rooms were trying to occupy the same space and time: the room of the humans and another room with Charger R/T and the First Ones battling the god. Shocked at the images of violence and chaos, the scientists began retreating from the secure room.

Abarth alone remained, facing an immense, violent, demonic being. All around it were beings of light, the size and shape of a human, battling an oily black sphere that seemed to radiate a brilliant golden light.

"Help me, child, and drive this demon back into hell!" a voice boomed from the sphere, in a language Abarth understood. He stood there in shock, slow to act. Then he reached over to the control panel next to him, clicked a few buttons and moved a few dials. Within seconds, each life form that had emerged from the time-lock was held secure and helpless within its own confinement field.

Abarth stared at the black sphere. It was hardly any bigger than Charger R/T. The mythology that he'd heard as a child said it was enormous, perhaps the size of a moon. So, had it shrunk because of being in time-lock? Or had it lost power because it was so far away from the parent mass at the center of the galaxy?

Now that the three entities were held helpless, Abarth waited for their rage and anger to settle. The heavy task force had finally reached the secure room. They stopped and stared in through the window, surprised to see Abarth standing alone and in apparent control of the situation.

Stunned by their confinement, the three beings began to settle down, except for Charger R/T. His rage burgeoned and he fought, wild-eyed, to break the confinement and continue attacking. It was only when Abarth spoke that Charger R/T slowed.

"Wait a minute, I know you," Abarth said, moving toward Charger R/T for a better look. "That's right, you're the guy from the statue. Are you a hero?"

Charger R/T growled "No!"

"How is it possible that you speak my language?" Abarth asked, as he poked a finger at the containment field that held Charger R/T. The demon resumed raging.

"That's pointless," Abarth said. "Our containment field has no difficulty holding you." He

continued to poke and tease the beast in the cage. Seeing that Abarth had no fear of the situation, one of the task force commanders entered the room.

Abarth snapped, "Typical! A planet of sheep, and the bravest one to enter the room is packing a weapon!"

The commander was not amused by Abarth laughing at him, and started barking orders to try and assert some dominance. He demanded that Abarth leave the room.

Abarth responded coolly. "The scientists hiding out there will attest that the device is linked to me in some mysterious way. If I leave, the device will shut down. Do you think that wise?"

Abarth's arrogance chafed the commander badly but, considering the options, he relented.

"That's a good little sheep," Abarth said. "How about you just piss off and let the scientists back into the room?"

For a moment, it seemed as if the beast laughed. "Oh, you think that's funny?" Abarth asked. "How about I tighten this confinement field up until I make you shit a bit?" Charger R/T focused his gaze on his tormentor. No one could tell what thoughts rolled around inside that twisted skull, but that they were bad was a good guess.

Another year passed and much was learned. The black sphere claimed to be the god of all humanity, but offered no proof. The light beings had been explained as the First Ones, an ancient early race of humanity created by the Grays, but this could not be verified. The beast refused to divulge anything but its name, 'Charger R/T.' This fascinated Abarth and, during every visit to the confinement site, he would spend hours talking to the beast. It refused to respond.

"Tell you what, Charger R/T," Abarth offered, as he moved closer to the confinement field holding the monster captive. "You tell me where you're from, and I'll see to it that you get a look outside these walls. I'm guessing that being locked up is getting old, huh? What do you say?"

There was a long pause, then Charger R/T spoke. "Earth."

"That's all? One word, Earth. Well, a deal is a deal." Abarth operated a few controls and the two were blinked from the underground room to the surface. "Welcome to New Eden." Still held firm in the confinement field, Charger R/T stared into the light of the red sun once again.

"What's the date?" Charger R/T finally asked.

"I've known you for over a year, and in all that time, you have said seven words," Abarth said. "Let's make a deal. You talk more and I'll tell you more."

Word number eight exploded from Charger R/T's mouth. "No!"

In the meantime, the most amazing discovery had been made by the scientific team. One of the First Ones had offered to work with the humans to better understand each other. It said it was named Enoch. The scientists were to learn later that all the First Ones were named Enoch. This particular Enoch provided all the missing information lost over time, even explaining the reason for Charger R/T's existence.

However, the truly exciting discovery was that these beings of light were in no way different from present humanity. Despite all the advances humans had made, these beings in the time-lock device were equal to modern people. Realizing there was little to fear from these captives, security was relaxed.

The most puzzling behavior came from the object claiming to be the god of all humanity. Unable to exercise power over the masses, it began trying to negotiate a position of power. In desperate attempts to convince humans to obey it, this god offered the most bizarre claims. It seemed truly depressed at the realization that it could no longer wipe out humanity as it had once claimed was possible. In spite of empty threats of fire and brimstone, it was apparently impotent. No one could believe that this ineffectual black sphere was a god of anything.

"Well, it seems we are not so different after all," Abarth remarked as he approached Charger R/T, now released from his confinement cage. Charger R/T was standing in the security room as Abarth entered and approached with confidence, sure of the scientists' new findings.

"Not true!" snapped Charger R/T as he thrust his fist hard into Abarth's chest. Had this happened in the far distant past, Abarth would have been dead. Now it was even difficult to hurt him, let alone kill him. Humanity's understanding of the newly discovered elements in the periodic table, and the useful ways this knowledge could be applied, had created a robust and durable new breed of humans, perhaps truly superior humans.

"Well, I guess I had that coming," Abarth gasped, activating his genetic structure to repair the damage caused by the blow. "How about I atone and buy you a beer?"

For a moment Charger R/T seemed to smile. He was trying to decide if he liked these new humans. At least they weren't as frail as he remembered.

"Good, I'll take that as a yes. Follow me," Abarth said with enthusiasm. A quick blink and Abarth was at his favorite haunt, but Charger R/T was nowhere to be seen. He blinked back to the secure room and found him just sitting there. Then Abarth realized that Charger R/T was technologically primitive and had no ability to travel. "Sorry, I didn't realize." Abarth held Charger R/T's arm and blinked both of them to the bar.

Being able to blink to any desired destination is a unique experience for the first-time traveler, and Charger R/T was no different in that respect to an ordinary human. The process of a blink involved imagining the destination one wished to go, then separating one's entire being into individual molecules and sending them one at a time through a layer of space and time in the same way one might fire the full magazine from an old-time machine gun. These molecules traveled instantly to the target and, on arrival, reassembled into the exact original pattern that the human had before the blink.

Abarth explained this as he leaned heavily on the edge of the bar and hammered down a pint of beer with a vodka chaser.

Charger R/T paid little attention to what Abarth slurred and was instead fixated on the fact that he was pinned into a booth between a table with a large mug of beer sloshing about and the bench he was sitting on. Frustrated and impatient, Charger R/T simply ripped the table from the floor and tossed it toward a few patrons, sending them ducking for cover.

"See! That's what I'm talking about," Abarth carried on. "Fucking sheep, the lot of them. Now, if you threw a table at me, I would throw it right back at you!" Abarth chugged another pint of beer and swigged a vodka. He was really enjoying Charger R/T's company.

Charger R/T growled, the sound emanating from deep inside him, and thought about snapping Abarth in two, just to see if he could survive and reform.

"I know what you're thinking," Abarth said. "I can read minds!" He snickered to himself as he imagined how this would affect Charger R/T. "How's about we fight!" Abarth blurted, as he staggered toward Charger, holding his fists in the air and trying to dance like a boxer in the ring.

Charger R/T backhanded the man so hard that he disappeared from the room. The patrons quickly grabbed their belongings and left. Charger R/T stood motionless for a time, trying to figure out what to do next. He decided to walk outside and look around. He didn't understand this world he found himself in and decided the strategic thing to do was to get information.

Crunching the stairs with his weight as he climbed up to the street level, he removed the small doorway to gain passage outside. Being in sunlight once again caused him to squint, making his contorted face look even more evil. Pedestrians hurried to cross the street rather than risk being in his path.

Abarth had recuperated from the blow to his body and, staggering up to Charger R/T, shouted, "Hey, let's try that again!" Abarth struck Charger R/T with all the gusto and strength he possessed, but it was like a bug hitting the windshield of a speeding car.

Charger R/T stood unmoved and, with another backhand, sent Abarth screeching through the air some five or six miles before he slammed into the ground. Within seconds Abarth blinked back into Charger R/T's path, much to the surprise of this giant human.

The fight continued. Every time Charger R/T hit Abarth, he would reform and hit back, bouncing upright like an inflatable punching bag clown that falls over when hit, then bobs up again. Abarth unleashed hundreds of years of pent-up frustration as he lashed out at Charger R/T as a substitute for those who caused the death of his beloved wife and children.

It finally got to the point where Abarth was crying and pounding on Charger R/T's chest, tears mixing with every blow. Between blows, he begged the beast to kill him, begged for a release from his grief and the life he had come to hate. Charger R/T stood unmoved and indifferent. Then started walking away.

Outraged at his inability to affect the monster, Abarth grabbed him by the arm and blinked high into the atmosphere. Abarth then blinked back to the ground for safety as he watched the helpless Charger R/T fall back to the surface. The heat of re-entry from such a height caused Charger R/T's body to catch fire and start burning. Without so much as a yell, Charger R/T impacted the ground so hard that his body was driven several yards into the earth. Unfazed, he crawled out of the hole.

Angry now, Charger R/T headed toward Abarth, who was yelling some challenge. Charger R/T caught the man by the throat and ripped Abarth's body in two pieces, tossing them on the ground. Still outraged, Charger R/T began smashing buildings. Wildly out of control, he continued trashing and raving. He was stopped only by the presence of a reformed Abarth standing in his path once again.

"Now do you understand?" Abarth asked. "It's almost impossible to destroy us. We may be immortal. Nobody knows yet for sure. We live each and every day just the same as the day before, with our memories fresh in our minds. I live every moment of every day in every point of time thinking of my wife and children, and looking for some way of getting justice for the wrongs that medicine caused."

"Screw you!" snapped Charger R/T. His great hand reached out, grabbed Abarth by the throat once again and squeezed, wondering if humans still required oxygen. But it didn't seem to matter. Charger R/T dropped the man on the ground and said, "I will just let your memories beat you up." He walked away, intent on exploring this new world.

Abarth stood helpless and fuming, trying desperately to think of a way to kill Charger R/T for this disrespect. From the dark pit of Abarth's twisted mind came an answer. He built the idea slowly, planning the details necessary to destroy this abomination called Charger R/T.

Abarth did not stop there. He would take revenge on all humanity as well.

"You will pay! You will all pay, if it's the last thing I ever do!" shouted Abarth to the world. Then he blinked.

## Chapter 3 Pennington on a mission

### DART SPEAKS TO READER:

Do you remember Pennington? She's the nice little old lady who started a new religion before the world ship traveled from New Eden to the Grays' home planet to destroy that evil species. She's still going strong a thousand years later, thanks to the medical advances in extending life, and she's still calling herself a pope.

Mm, yes, you could say that she's cracked. After all, she thought the Grays were a wonderful, benevolent species, based on one solitary incident which didn't even happen to her, but to her great grandmother. But, as you know, religion is largely based on imagination and Pennington has plenty of that.

Oh, and have I told you she's going to team up with Abarth?

No, I'm not kidding! I said she was nice; I didn't say she had brains.



Pennington sat on the deck outside her house, a shawl wrapped tightly around her shoulders against the night's bitter cold. Such suffering was the price she and her followers had to pay for their new place of refuge. Though the great northern regions of New Eden didn't have snow, they were cold enough to kill. Members of this colony often remarked that the weather might be more tolerable if they did get snow; at least falling snowflakes were festive.

She had taken the name of Pope Paul to create a bond with her people, a bond that was often strained by the interference of disbelievers and deniers. Her once pretty face was now deeply lined, and her jowls sagged. Age had not been kind to this Pope of the people, though she had accepted all the medical advances in extending life.

The planet's past president, Tegra-Duran, had seen to it that any dissidents who wanted to distance themselves from the majority of survivors in the conflict with the black sphere god would not be compensated or supported. So, it fell to the few believers who had followed Pennington to this inhospitable part of the world to carve out of the wilderness the paradise which faith promised.

Celeste came out onto the deck and offered Pennington a hot cup of tea, hoping this might distract her long-time friend and encourage her to realize the bitterness of the night's air. "Maybe you should stop worrying about the new president and come inside?" Celeste suggested. Pennington sat motionless. "I don't believe he will be any different from the last president. We still won't receive support from the cities."

"It's hard to believe, in a time of such great wealth and prosperity, that our brothers and sisters are so willing to make us suffer for our beliefs," Pen said.

"The world has been a wicked place since science locked our god away. It is for that reason we are made to suffer. We are to pay the price for the deceitful behavior of our brothers and sisters. Their selfish desire to survive, over our god's will to create, has doomed the planet."

Celeste had always been a bit of an extremist, Pen thought. Often, she did make sense, but not this time. "I think what humanity has done is fair. Their fear of the unknown and their disregard of their souls is not for us to judge. Our task is to offer guidance." Pen sipped from the cooling cup of tea.

"I just do not understand how science locked away our god so easily. God must have a plan,

and we must wait for him to reveal it." Realizing that Pen wouldn't return to the warmth of their small hut, Celeste sat down next to her friend.

Pennington had always been a bit of an extremist, Celeste thought. Like Pen, she had accepted all the medical enhancements to life as they came along, up until the last two hundred years. Then, because Pope Paul preached constantly against science and technology, she eased her guilt by refusing anything more coming from that source. After all, when she died, she would go and dwell with the god, would she not? And wasn't that what she should want to do; wasn't that the ultimate bliss?

Celeste didn't object to Pope Paul taking all the medical treatments, though the woman was so haggard now that Celeste suspected she must be suffering much guilt for doing so. But Pen's leadership was essential for their group and for the conversion of those poor ignorant souls who did not know where true happiness lay.

The members of this small colony lived in a cluster of basic two-room huts and gathered daily in a large, well-built church at the center. There, Pope Paul addressed her people and imparted stories of her great grandmother's long ago encounters with the small Gray alien. Pen often took credit for the kindness humanity had shown to the Grays after all the damage they had wrought, and felt that somehow she was responsible for humanity taking the moral high road and refusing to punish the agrarian Grays who remained.

This was completely untrue, for the world ship's leader had asked the populace for a decision, and the people, through compassion and logic, reasoned that nothing could be gained from revenge, and therefore spared the Grays. Pen's voice had been heard, but hers was only one of many that day. Thus, the survivors of the violence on the Grays' planet gave up the desire to avenge themselves for the destruction of Earth and made the long trek back to their starting point, where they soon found themselves facing a vengeful god, bent on punishing humans for acts they had had no part in.

The time-lock device that housed Charger R/T and the black sphere which claimed to be humanity's god, along with the surviving First Ones, was deemed too dangerous for humanity to keep in its possession. Pennington had often heard the story of how the time-lock device was entrusted to the few remaining Taskoids, who hid the device, burying it deep underground. Locking their bodies together to entomb the device, they died that way, so the story went, thus keeping its location secret from humanity.

From the podium in her church, Pope Paul lectured her followers at great length on the folly of mankind in allowing this action. Pen had reasoned that a god could not be so easily contained, and that the followers should test their faith by venturing out into the wilderness and finding the time-lock. Many gave their lives to this cause, for the northern regions of New Eden were harsh and unforgiving to inexperienced travelers.

The night's bitter air finally grew too much for Pen to endure. She and Celeste retired for another night. When she awoke in the morning, Celeste was surprised to find Pen missing from her bed, for her leader was usually a late riser.

Pen had indeed dragged her old body from the comfortable refuge of her bed and, after dressing, made her way to the large church, dreading the step she intended to take. The idea had been rolling about in her mind for several months. Steeling herself, she retrieved a small digital device from its hiding place under the pulpit. Rotating it in her hands and inspecting it closely, Pen was sure that she understood how to activate it. With several clicks of buttons on the face, in a pattern she had decided made perfect sense, the device sparked to life.

Pen held in her hands a piece of old Taskoid technology, which had been found by one of

the congregation almost a year back and deemed too wicked for them to be involved with. What Pen did now was completely opposed to her usual vehement rejection of science and technology. As she drew the small device up to her failing eyes, she told herself that she was the only one capable of using this cursed reminder of a time best forgotten.

The small Taskoid communication device began clicking out a location. Pennington was elated. It had to be directions to the last remaining Taskoids that hid the time-lock.

Celeste had entered the church quietly in search of her pope and found Pen holding and operating this wicked abomination. Shocked, she cried, "You can't be serious! If you use that thing, then every member of our church will realize that the people you sent out looking for god's tomb will have perished for nothing."

"Do you think I have not considered this?" Pope Paul demanded. "I cannot reconcile my faith with inaction, and it is time someone did something! I had a vision from god last night, and he asked me to find his location. Don't you see? It's a test! God will reward me with the powers I need to smite his offenders. I will be his right hand, and his glory will rain down terror on those who dare challenge his power and righteousness." Pope Paul was working herself up into a frantic rage as she desperately tried to find religious answers for her apparent deceit.

Celeste began to realize that something was clearly amiss. This was not the Pennington she knew. Had her friend truly been touched by god, she wondered?

Pennington had certainly been touched, but not by a god. A small blood clot was forming deep in her brain. Her age and poor diet were finally catching up with her.

"In my vision I was promised that heaven and the angels themselves will flock to my side, and I will hold the rod of god, once held by Moses himself. I will wipe the world clean of all the unbelievers, and bring a new world order, led by me!"

Celeste felt herself morally rising to support her Pope, encouraged by the frankness and conviction of this woman.

Pennington shuddered, stumbled, and fell to the floor, convulsing. The impression of a great leader speaking in tongues could not be ignored. Others of the congregation had come into the church, drawn both by the noise and the fact that this was the only truly warm building in the colony. Pope Paul continued to rant, convulsing but holding the clicking, sparking device well hidden beneath her cloak. "The rod was delivered to me by god!" Pope Paul yelled out, convincing everyone that this was a true miracle.

Many followers fell to their knees and prayed fervently, hoping to be one of those benefiting from this holy moment. Celeste, plunging into the spirit of things, threw her hands high into the air and shouted to the gathering, "Be witness to the glory of god, a prophet has been given to us this day. We must follow and be guided by this blessing. Fear not, for god is on our side. He has chosen us to be the new voice of righteousness and we will not fail him."

Encouraged by the spectacle of Pope Paul apparently speaking in tongues, the members of her group began to mobilize. One of the leaders was Abarth. Celeste watched as he shouted encouragement and could not help admiring his ability to motivate people and make decisions in an emergency.

And Abarth was such a nice man, Celeste thought, as well as efficient. He had been utterly devastated by the death of his wife and three daughters at the hands of medical science and turned to religion for help, becoming a devoted follower. At first the members were all very supportive of his pain but, as nothing seemed to diminish his distress, people began focusing more on their own lives, and gave less and less support to the grieving widower. Perhaps she ought to ask Pen, in one of her sermons, to remind the members of Abarth's tragic loss.

For his part, Abarth was merely doing what he did best: leading. He knew that whatever the Pope thought she'd found, it wasn't the burial place of the god. He had just returned to the group after a period in Eur, doing reconstruction work and ensuring that the god and the First Ones were safely isolated in confinement fields. Pen and her group didn't know this, since the authorities had decided not to release any news concerning the time-lock to the general public. Now Abarth wanted to know what Pennington had discovered. It might be worthwhile to stick around and find out. If it conferred any kind of power, he would use it to aid his revenge against humanity and most particularly against Charger R/T.

People ran from the church, calling for others to rise and follow. The three thousand members of this northern colony began the arduous task of preparing to trek out into the wilderness and leave behind the humble community they had built. Naturally, having fully rejected the evils of science and technology, they would walk to their destination and camp along the way. The adventure was about to begin.

Much of New Eden's vegetation was like Earth's, but the wood on this planet was nearly impossible to burn. The different chemical processes that defined the short, stocky trees meant a large amount of heat was required before ignition could begin. The ground in the northern areas was also rough and abrasive, which made walking a great effort. Like the deserts of Earth, the sands found here caused friction and damage to the shoes of travelers. The chafing of the ground was at times so bad that footwear was ripped from the feet of the wearer, and anyone unfortunate enough to walk barefoot would lose skin from the soles of the feet.

The atmosphere, too, was so dry that air taken into the lungs could burn the unprotected, especially if a storm kicked up any winds. Without the benefit of technology, this trek for the faithful would be more of a death march than an adventure.

Pope Paul promised the faithful that god would protect them, and anyone who fell victim to the elements was surely undeserving of god's reward. After a week of preparation, the group began the trek. At the front of the procession, Pen and Celeste sat high on a cart pulled by the faithful, singing songs to encourage the masses following them.

At the end of that first day, when tents were set up to house the three thousand colonists, the cold night air deterred Pen and Celeste from preaching to the followers and they retired to bed early. With few fires burning and the cold settling in, most of the colonists resorted to sleeping together in groups for warmth. This meant that in some cases adult men slept beside the daughters of neighbors but, fortunately, nothing resulted from this, other than temptation.

Next day, after breakfast and a sermon, the trek to find the god continued. Pen often ordered her cart to stop, while she encouraged the people passing by, telling them she was being guided by a miraculous and powerful force. Hidden beneath her clothing, the communications device clicked on, leading the group to its fate.

"Can you feel it?" Pen asked Celeste. "I believe that god has finally revealed to me his plan. Soon we will be at his tomb and, with our faith reinvigorated, we should be able to defeat the science that was used to imprison him." The two women sat upright and stared off over the horizon from their seats on the cart, as members from the congregation took turns pulling them along the sandpapery ground.

"It's good to finally be doing something," Celeste replied. "We spent too long at the colony and too many things were provided for us. I think we became spoiled with our life there. Some suffering will do us all good. I just wish these small insect things would stop biting me; it's becoming quite a nuisance."

There had been no insects on New Eden since black clouds of cicadas in the billions killed

off most of the early humans. The steps taken by the Taskoids to eliminate this threat had wiped out all insect life. What Celeste didn't know was that, in this northern land, the air could become charged with ionic particles. These particles had the same effect as an insect bite but were much more damaging to the human body. Enough shocks from these charged particles could, in fact, cause the heart to stop, resulting in death. But only a scientist would have found the cause before it became a problem.

Soon, however, this fact was becoming evident, as colonists would suddenly just drop dead. By the time a month had passed, two hundred men, women and children had died. Pope Paul used this to urge the colonists to greater effort, claiming the deaths were evidence of the victims' unfaithfulness.

One morning, the two women found themselves facing a line of towering cliffs that stretched off toward the horizon in both directions. "Are you sure the device is still working?" Celeste whispered to Pen.

"Quite sure. This is the direction we need to travel," Pen whispered back. It was crucial that no one else know of the device. When the colonists gathered, Pen addressed the crowd. "We will build a road to the top. This is a true test of our faith, and we must rise to the occasion. I will be the first to start clearing stones and moving dirt to create a road. Who is with me?"

Enthusiastic, and perhaps slightly mad with hunger, the masses joined in. They had expected the journey to be relatively short and the food they'd carried from the colony was almost gone. Rationing had been in effect for the past week.

The next month brought more deaths, which at least meant more resources left for survivors. The road now reached almost a quarter of the way up the cliff. Pen spent many days in her tent, complaining bitterly about the lack of progress, and insisted that the colonists workday and night to reach the top faster. They responded with renewed vigor. They were grateful not to be slaves to technology and science, like the people they had left behind in warm, safe cities. They took pride in being free people, doing god's work.

But one young boy did object, his voice as bitter as Pen's. He had lost his father only days before. He missed his mother and wanted to return to the cities of the south. Pen realized this could be disastrous for the cause and decided to seek god's guidance.

First, Pen called in the road workers for the night. Then, in the darkness, she walked up to the end of the work area and consulted her digital device. Suddenly, high up on the cliff, a blinding light flashed, visible to the faithful down below. Moments later, Pen emerged from the darkness to tell of her encounter with one of god's angels.

Everyone was awed by this amazing event, though none had actually witnessed it. So convincing was Pen's speech that no one needed to witness the event, for she painted a perfect picture for everyone's imagination.

One question was raised. Very little food was left. Would it be possible for god to provide the masses with extra rations? To this end, Pope Paul assured the congregation that god had heard their prayers, that salvation was at hand and more food would be provided in the coming days.

The solution was simple. Pen and Celeste sent a huge number of people off on quests to both the west and east ends of the cliff face, with the promise that they would surely help the group if they could find a path to the top of the cliff as well as some food. With only fifteen hundred colonists remaining to build the road to the top, their prayers were answered: there was now more food for everyone.

The labor went on. "God is truly a miracle worker. With so many of our young girls getting

pregnant, our ranks will swell again to the numbers we had when we started this great journey," Pen said confidently to Celeste.

"Yes, it is truly divine," Celeste responded as she sipped from her teacup. They sat together in front of their tent, now halfway up the cliff face at a new base camp. Far below, workers were demolishing the road they had created. Pen had suggested that if any scientists tried to stop them, they would surely use this road to reach the group. With the road destroyed and impassable, no one on foot could reach them.

It took the group six months to build and then destroy the road to the top of the cliff. Now there could be no turning back, ever. And, when they reached the top, new and frightening knowledge faced them. The great northern regions of New Eden did not have snow, but vast stretches of open, wind-swept ice fields stretched out before the colonists. With many young pregnant women close to their due dates, Pen reluctantly ordered her people to set up camp. They would remain here till after the births.

One evening, as the colonists sat around their fires to keep warm, a strange noise rose in the distance. Across the ice fields came an eerie howling. This was shocking because, during all the reconnaissance missions to explore the planet, no life was ever found to exist in the frozen north.

But there was indeed life, though difficult to find. These large predators hibernated for several years, sometimes as many as fourteen years, depending on the planet's cycle. New Eden followed a deeply elliptical orbit around its small red sun. This had the effect of creating randomly spaced seasons in the northern region, and these predators had the ability to hibernate in dens deep below the surface. Biologists did suspect they existed, but none had ever been seen.

The colonists grew fearful as the howling came nearer. Unsure of what to do, they banded together around the central fire of the camp and pulled old, retired weapons from their packs.

"Everyone just remain calm," Celeste shouted. "I'm sure that our faith in god will protect us."

Nothing could protect humans from the apex predator, now awake and hungry. These bear-like creatures traveled at lightning speed over the open ice fields toward the camp. They ran on two legs, though they had a large rear stump of a hind leg and a thick firm front limb, and they reached speeds of nearly a hundred miles per hour. They had binocular vision, so could see stereoscopically, but their eyes were set low on their faces, creating a blind spot above. Oddly, they had no teeth, only a stinger that would erupt from their chests and was used to drain the fluids from their prey.

The colonists finally saw the pack of predators racing toward them. Antique weapons exploded in gunfire, never once hitting a target. Colonists crumpled to their knees sobbing and weeping at the futility of their situation.

Therefore, the explosions which destroyed the beasts came as a complete surprise. High above them, combat ships had emerged from the cloud cover and were destroying these creatures, killing most, and sending the rest scattering for cover.

The elders far to the south had long watched these colonists on satellite images, unwilling to get involved unless absolutely necessary. They had already rescued the two groups, near death, that Pen had sent west and east in search of food and trails. The authorities had decided to let the other colonists continue their trek, but to keep ships and troops at the ready.

The lead ship landed close to the camp. From it emerged Captain Marshall, a tall, thin man with jet black hair. "Hope you don't mind, but we were in the neighborhood and thought we might stop in for a cup of tea," Captain Marshall said, with a dry smile.

"You are quite welcome to join us," Celeste responded, as she ordered members to start

preparing food. "I was just telling my followers to have faith that god would provide for us. And here you are!"

"Yes, well, there is that," responded the captain. He decided it would be pointless to explain his presence to such a convinced believer.

Now that things seemed under control, Pope Paul emerged from her tent and welcomed the new guests. This did not go unnoticed among the colonists. "Captain, you say you just happened to be in the area. That does seem a little unlikely." Pen drew closer to the bonfire.

"Well, ma'am, we were near enough to be curious, and that's a good thing. Considering the climate here and all you've been through, don't you think that you would be safer in the cities?" Captain Marshall's tone was firm. He hoped to strike chords of reason in as many people as was possible.

"My followers are perfectly safe, child," Pennington said in a condescending manner. "Our god has seen to our safety this far, and I believe he will see us to our destination. But, if any of my flock would like to leave, they are free to do so."

Some colonists didn't wait to be asked twice. They headed for the waiting ships.

"There, you see!" snapped Pen, disgusted. "Those who are weak have left us freely. Now will you also depart?" Her manner suggested this was not a question but an order.

Captain Marshall tipped his hat and said, "Well, if no others wish to leave, then I will be off. Goodbye to you all."

The ships lifted skyward and disappeared into the night. They were crammed with all the women who had given birth and a good majority of the men responsible.

Pen and Celeste felt the impact of the loss of so many, but stubbornly ranted on well into the early morning, praising the remainder and promising places in heaven. The next day found a much-reduced group of colonists packing and heading further north, walking into the frozen wastes. One of the members happened to mention the futility of building a road up the cliff, when technology was available that would allow them to simply fly safely to their destination. He was left to freeze in the ice.

By now the carts had failed and Celeste and Pen had to walk, like the others. Singing hymns, they pressed on, but at a slower pace.



The group had been walking for only two days across the blistering cold of the ice field with its high winds and biting air, when dissension arose.

One of the older men said to Abarth, the designated group leader, "I'm telling you, this is madness!" The group had been huddled together trying to fend off the wind, hopeful for an end to this vast expanse of ice. "We have no wood for a fire, we have no water to drink, and we are unable to eat because our food is frozen," the old man continued.

Abarth seemed to take no notice of the complaints.

"If we turn back now, back to the trees behind us, some of us might live," the old man insisted.

"That's enough!" Abarth snapped, tired of the old man stating the obvious. "Why do you keep complaining? We will be just as dead if those beasts decide to attack us again. This is our road to salvation. If you are no longer a true believer, feel free to turn back."

The old man looked at Abarth with disbelief, not sure if the man was mad or simply delusional. "You would willingly let me walk back to the trees by myself, at my age, with no

help?" He was shaking with fear, unsure if he was willing to give up his life just yet.

"I will walk back with you," a young woman stated.

"As will I," came another voice.

Then several others joined in. A small group of seven gathered to begin the walk back to the trees. Celeste decided to act. "Brothers and sisters," she said quickly, "Our pope has decided that a few of you should return to the trees behind us and collect some firewood. I pick you seven there." Celeste pointed to the group already departing. "Go now, retrieve some wood for us and return quickly. Your pope has ordered that this shall be so."

"Yeah? I won't be returning," one of the departing seven said under her breath.

The remaining members, now full of renewed hope, praised the wisdom of their pope and their good fortune to be part of such a great and noble quest.

After several more days of struggling, the group half frozen and near dead, Celeste and Pen reached the far side of the ice field, following the Taskoid communication device's directions. During this week-long trek, more people had died, and now only a handful of followers remained. The ice field ended at the base of a mighty mountain rising from the land like a huge black specter, foreboding and ominous.

However, they now had trees around them again and a fire was quickly made, and food cooked. Both Celeste and Pen went on at some length thanking god for their good fortune.

Unknown to the group, the city elders far to the south had kept military craft in the area, and these quickly rescued the seven who had 'gone for firewood.'

"Are you sure this is the right spot?" Celeste asked Pennington.

"Yes, quite sure. According to these readings, it's about a third of the way up this mountain," Pen replied, as she fondled the Taskoid device, away from prying eyes.

The night was full of starlight. So black was the area that the sky seemed almost white with stars. The small group spent the evening writing in diaries about this momentous adventure, careful to record only a religious perspective and omit any personal doubts that might reflect badly on the group. After all, when their objective had been achieved, the whole world would clamor to read their stories. With that work finished, many were grateful for a good night's sleep next to the warmth of a fire.

In the morning light, tents were quickly stowed away, and the group began climbing up the jagged rocks to the destination Pennington pointed out. "It's not far now. Have faith! Our god is a merciful god and has allowed us chosen few to reach this goal," Pen shouted as the men hauled her and Celeste up the cliffs. "Let's all sing!"

Most were short of breath but made the effort all the same. Grabbing at rocks and tree branches for support the group climbed for several hours before Pen ordered them to stop and make camp. They were only a short walk from the location the communicator was indicating.

While the group set up tents and made fires for a late evening meal, Celeste and Pen crept from the camp. Within minutes, the two friends found the place they sought. They felt sure that there, under the rubble and dirt of the steep hillside, was the time-lock which had captured their god in the sky fight with the great demon, Charger R/T. The two women fell to their knees and started rooting around in the dirt, pebbles, and dead leaves, eager to find the object of their desire.

Their hands soon struck a metallic object. Inspired, they frantically cleared away the dirt and made out the shape of something large and clearly alien. Then the rest of the group found them and joined in pulling away dirt and pebbles. After an hour or so, they uncovered the object, to the praises and hallelujahs of Celeste.

In the light of flashlight beams, the object appeared to be scorched badly and looked like a large, square meteorite. The group packed it back to the camp and placed it in the largest tent, the food tent. Then they began to argue about who would have the privilege of cleaning it up. Even Abarth could not control the fights which erupted as many tried desperately to confirm their religious zealotry.

It was only when Pope Paul took the communications device from beneath her robes, placed it in a slot on the object, and activated it that the group forgot their quarrels. These faithful followers had been told by their pope that technology and science were always the work of the devil. So why did she now possess and use technology?

Before anyone could ask that question, the metal device started to react. Small colored lights blinked on and clicking of gears and switches could be heard.

This, as Abarth knew so well, was not the time-lock that held their god. It was, in fact, the remainder of the Prime Taskoid. The Prime had been the only being able to get close enough to Charger R/T and the god during their battle in the sky and, with the help of a First One, capture the combatants in the time-lock device. The Prime escaped being drawn into the time-lock field and, unseen, fell back to earth, crashing into this mountainside, where it had remained for a thousand years, lost and forgotten.

It took some time before Pen and Celeste realized that this was not the time-lock, but the Prime. The hatred this group had for the Prime, equally responsible with Charger R/T for the loss of their god, began to build into an ungovernable rage.

As morning broke, and the first rays of sunlight filtered through the tent's opening, the Prime's digital optics stirred to life, giving the once dormant mechanoid its first look around. Corrupted programs began defragging and organizing, giving relevance to the Prime's mind. Its power source had been depleted and the internal clock reset, so the Prime had no idea when or where it was. It understood quickly enough that it had no ability to move and, as was the protocol, a diagnostic subroutine was enacted. The information returned to the Prime's main program told of a desperate situation: over seventy percent of the unit was destroyed. The Prime had exposed internals, badly damaged power units, and no limbs. For all intents and purposes, the unit should not be functioning.

"I still think we might be wrong," Celeste said to Pen just outside the door to the tent that held the Prime. "What you're proposing amounts to torture. How will our followers react to this?"

Pennington sucked in a breath, steeling herself for what she felt was necessary. "We have an opportunity here," she began. "This thing is responsible for the confinement of our god, and I truly believe that if we press it hard enough, it will give us the location of the time-lock device."

"Can you hear yourself?" Celeste responded as she reached out to gently touch Pen's arm. "We've already deceived our followers by using the technology you have always forbidden. Now you want to further endanger our reputation by an inquisition. We are in a precarious situation here, and I think the others might rebel. We should carry what we have back to the village in the south. We can then take our time and try to get help from scientists nearby." Celeste spoke carefully, hoping Pen could be swayed from her present course of action.

"Scientists! How could you even consider such a thing?" Pen blurted, her face turning red with rage. She was certain that science was wholly responsible for the capture of their god, and the very suggestion of cooperating with representatives of the despised sciences was unthinkable and unforgivable. "Science tried to kill our god! I say we use their science against them! I say we send science a message! I say we torture and kill, if necessary, this abomination of science in

order to free our god!"

Pope Paul had gone into full preaching mode, ranting loud enough that her followers could hear every word. These few members of her congregation were starving and cold, and might be forgiven for the state their minds were in. However, this could not be true for Pope Paul, who was well-fed and warm. Celeste was beginning to fear the level of commitment that her pope was demanding, fearful for her very soul.

"I can't in good conscience agree with this course of action. We can't stoop to the level of torture, even on such a wretched creation." Celeste hoped that if she drew a line in the sand, her pope would reconsider.

"Fine! I will do it myself! Your hands need not get dirty!" Pope Paul shouted, her voice full of hate. Pennington flung open the door to the tent and stormed inside alone.

From outside, Celeste and the others heard sounds of screeching metal and what sounded like cries of pain. This went on for hours before Pen exited the tent, her face twisted and sharp. "I am not finished. I will return in an hour. No one is allowed to enter the tent!" Pope Paul walked to the small altar she had erected to pray for forgiveness. When she returned, Celeste and the others saw a wild-eyed, determined woman bent on getting the answers she wanted. Everyone stepped back, giving room for Pope Paul to enter the tent and continue with the torture.

As it went on, some of the followers began whispering to each other. They could tell that the pope was not asking any questions, she was just physically torturing the creature. This madness carried on for hours before Celeste finally had to interrupt. "I think you should stop for the night, don't you?" she asked. Pennington, who looked exhausted, agreed. As her pope retired into the sleeping tent the two women shared, Celeste took a moment to look inside the other tent at the captured Prime.

What she witnessed were erratic sparking lights and the convulsive movement of some of the Prime's internal parts. What she heard were spoken words, some twisted into mournful cries, the result of the Prime's speech circuit being damaged.

"My god, it's a living being!" Celeste said aloud. Unfamiliar with technology and burdened with guilt, she could hardly be blamed for her superstitious outburst.

The small congregation was also looking inside the tent. Abarth asked, "If it's alive, it must also have a soul!"

The implication was obvious; the pope was torturing a human being with a soul that could be saved. The Prime lay helpless, with no means of defense, its metallic panels opened to expose the pulsing currents inside. Several work tools, like screw drivers and pry bars, were shoved deep inside the metallic body.

If the Prime was indeed alive, it was also clearly dying.



In the morning, Celeste took Abarth aside, away from the group, and said that she was going to tell the others to return to the south and leave the Prime behind. She requested his cooperation, her manner indicating that she expected unquestioning obedience. He could see that she was trying to save her long-time friend, Pennington, and thinking that if the group left for the south, Pen would be forced to go along.

"That is unacceptable," Abarth said. "We should remain and get the answers we need, then we can go rescue god." He desperately wanted to discover what kind of power the Prime contained and seize it. He would need all the power he could gather, from whatever source, in

order to destroy humanity.

Celeste looked shocked at his refusal, then shook her head. "The Prime has no idea where the time-lock device is, or even the place and time it now finds itself in. The interrogation is pointless."

Abarth snapped. The only thought in his mind was that this stupid woman must be silenced. Hardly even realizing what he was doing, he grabbed his knife from its inside pocket and lashed out, slashing Celeste across the throat and opening up a sizable wound. The gash was so large and deep that Celeste's head hung from her body by only a few shreds of flesh.

Unable to control his madness, Abarth continued to attack the defenseless woman. Because she had taken some of the life extension treatments, she lived for several minutes to suffer at his hands. Finally, she managed to stumble out of the trees and into the campground, bleeding profusely and unable to name her attacker.

Celeste lay dying in Pennington's arms as Abarth stood close by, his knife back in its sheath and his mind racing. He frantically sought an excuse that would let him escape his responsibility for Celeste's death. He pointed at the tent where the Prime lay.

"That thing attacked Celeste! That thing is what attacked our pope's friend!" Abarth yelled, hoping to stir up the others to rush to the defense of their pope.

Abarth found the moment almost too much to bear. First there was the loss of his family. He'd had no legal recourse for the death of his wife and daughters and, since the life extension procedure had been so successful with him, he was now forced to live, perhaps forever, bearing this loss. Then had come the loss of friends, this trek to nowhere, and the crumbling belief that he had once just barely convinced himself might be true. And now, Celeste had treated him like a servant.

Wild with fear and frustration, Abarth led the remaining members back into the tent where the shattered Prime lay. They beat its broken body until the last sparking light went out, until the last automatic responses of shattered circuits died away.

None of them knew, however, that only moments before the destruction of this once powerful being, the approach of an object far out in space activated the file that had first brought consciousness to the Taskers.

This small, strange bit of code allowed the Prime and others like it to 'decide;' the code was foreign and radically different from the base code. It also contained a data burst which relayed a message. That message caused the Prime to send out a signal, as the code commanded.

After all the chaos, brutality, and panic, the group was in turmoil. Their leader was now distressed and impotent, and their purpose lost. Abarth grabbed this opportunity to seize power by leading the group himself. With Pennington too distraught to object, Abarth began organizing the move back south.

## Chapter 4 First attack on Crest

### DART SPEAKS TO READER:

Does Charger R/T feel sorry for what he does? Oh, Reader, I don't think my father feels anything, to be truthful. Certainly not pity or sadness.

You're right. Having him as a biological dad was not much fun. Thank you for understanding but, in a way, I'm kind of proud of him.

My mom? What about her? I would rather not discuss my mom, that's quite a large topic and we don't have much time left.

All right, I will tell you a little about my mom but then I must prepare you for the long journey ahead. Her name was Reanna, and her mother and grandmother were famous heroes in history. Reanna's mother was called Gin. Her grandmother was Hanna.

That's right, Hanna Massey was a hero in the Mahoud-Earth War.

What I didn't tell you, though, was that when my mom gave birth to me, she was almost a hundred and seventy-four years old.

You see, Reader, my mom was nearly dead when they found her. She had been on the second mission to a planet named Crest when she was a young girl. The ship got lost and they arrived years and years later and found the colonists all gone, so my mother stole the ship and tried to go find help. Then the ship got lost again and when she finally found a planet occupied by humans, she was very old. The medical staff tried to save her by using the latest technology in extending life cycles, but because humans had already altered their own DNA and couldn't use it on her, they had no viable way to resuscitate her.

Then this one doctor figured it out. He knew that Charger R/T would have DNA compatible with hers. Charger R/T was a man out of time, a living fossil, a walking dinosaur from a time before time. His DNA was close to what my mom needed, and, with some work, they jimmied something up and restored her to life. It had to be more complicated than that, but you get the point.

After the procedure was complete, the medics were shocked to find that my mom, a virgin, had become pregnant with me. Whatever the medical staff of that time did, or didn't do, with the DNA from Charger R/T, it got my mom pregnant. Anyway, she died giving birth to me, so I never knew her. What I learned came from the historical records.

Reader, first I will tell you about the planet Crest. That was where my mother went, on the second mission sent there from Earth.

My own life? We'll get to that, I promise.



In the early years of the twenty-first century, astronomers on Earth discovered a star that harbored a small habitable planet, which they called GHQ179. The news of this discovery was never released to the public.

The discoverers of this tiny world, half the size of Earth's moon, worked for a secretive military tri-service group. They had been given a presidential order to send a group of specialists to occupy any potentially conquerable planet that their current technology could reach. GHQ179 met the criteria, and preparations spun into action.

In 2025, the Earth ship USS Rothschild took aboard a crew of 300 highly trained

combatnauts, a combination of astronaut and combat specialist, and began the 80-year journey. The technology necessary for cryogenics had not yet been developed, so the ship was run as a military generational ship.

Building the ship itself was a major project. A series of large self-contained launchable sections were rocketed into orbit and joined together there to make a whole ship, its engine drive and life support components centralized. With living and working stations limited to the surfaces, the ship resembled a huge corkscrew submarine. The living quarters were small but efficient and inflatable expansion quarters were ready for new travelers as soon as they were born.

Gravity, so vital for humanity's survival, was achieved with rotation. Radiation was minimized and treated with drugs to ensure a high survival rate. Everything was recycled, even the dead. Military drills and practices were repeated regularly. Education, sciences, and engineering were constantly upgraded. The USS Rothschild was, for its day, a technological masterpiece. Throughout the journey, communication boosting modules were placed in orbits, providing almost instantaneous two-way transmissions.

The first two commanders of the USS Rothschild were Colonel B. Moseley and Colonel J. Jennings. Moseley was rigid and organized; Jennings was equally capable but more humane. She resolved many of the engineering difficulties found in an aging ship. The final commander was Colonel C. Crest. He patiently and tactfully tempered the enthusiasm and nervousness of the crew as the USS Rothschild found a safe orbit around GHQ179. So well liked that the planet was named after him, Colonel Crest relinquished command immediately upon landing, and the provisional government took over.

The Mahoud-Earth war had begun five years after the USS Rothschild launched, when returning was all but impossible. At first, the ship maintained communications with their dying home world, but soon suspended it for security reasons. The first task of the new provisional government was to train these human survivors on Crest and prepare them to one day return and retake Earth if, indeed, its people had lost the war. Like a message in a bottle, the Crest survivors were guarded as mankind's last children. But, as with all things, over the long years Earth became only a memory.

Life on Crest was not very difficult because all contingencies had been resolved by science before the ship even left Earth. The vegetation on Crest was found to be unfit for humans, so land was cleared, sterilized, and reinvigorated with all the right properties to help Earth crops grow. Thanks to medical advancements, genetically created animals thrived and were well-protected within the settlement walls. As the years passed, life flourished and multiplied on Crest.

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About a hundred years after military colonists from the USS Rothschild established the flourishing community, Gene, a typical thirteen-year-old girl, finished the day's schooling and military training and went exploring the great unknown wilderness of Crest with her girlfriend, Shane.

"Last week Billy was daring me to cross the creek in West Pines. He is such a retard; he thought I'd be scared," Gene said confidently, as she quickly scaled and conquered every obstacle in her path.

Shane was overweight and slower. She complained bitterly, "That's great, but do we need to

get to the creek so quickly?"

"What would you do if a barknack was right behind you? I'm sure your fear would have your heels passing mine." Gene was trying to egg her friend on.

"That's not funny!" Shane snapped as she stopped running and desperately looked around through the bushes to see if a barknack might actually be following her. "I heard last week that two twelfth grade students got killed by a barknack. They're supposed to be southern beasts, so how did they get this far north?" Shane realized she was talking to herself and started running after Gene. When Shane caught up, Gene was already at the creek and getting undressed.

"This creek doesn't look so tough. Billy's an idiot for betting me his lunch money for the whole next year," chirped Gene gleefully. She dipped her bare toe in the creek and her whole foot went numb. "Wow, that's cold!"

"Maybe we should get some cold-water gear and come back?" asked Shane, hoping that returning home would banish the vision of a rampaging barknack stomping on her pudgy body.

"No, I can do this. It's no more than three yards wide. If I take a run at it, I can clear half that distance." Gene backed up so that she could run full speed at the creek.

Shane protested, "If you get stuck, what will you do?"

The water on the planet had its own peculiarities, but Gene had little understanding of them. With all the bravery a thirteen-year-old girl could muster, Gene bolted headlong, sure of her abilities. She easily cleared the halfway point but that was all. The icy water froze Gene in her tracks. Shane yelled in fear as she realized her friend's predicament.

Suddenly Gene was lifted from the water by an invisible force and placed on the far side of the creek. Naked and shivering uncontrollably, she glanced around, trying to understand what had happened. Then she saw what stood next to Shane. It was a small humanoid with long arms and leathery, gray skin. It seemed to be holding Shane paralyzed in some type of force field, lifting and rotating her in the air.

Gene was stunned. The thing had to be an alien! And she'd never even believed they existed.

The alien showed no emotion as it tormented Shane. Gene was too numb to help, but she cried and begged for the thing to release her friend. It paid no attention and moved off into the bush with its prize. Terror galvanized Gene and she ran downstream to look for a safe crossing.

Hours later Gene made it back to the city, naked and half-crazed, and told the authorities what had transpired. It took very little time for the military police to act, and several armed forces set out to search.

"This way! Quick!" Gene pleaded, as she led the authorities through the bush back to the creek. "This is where it happened."

The groups fanned out and began covering ground.

Two weeks later the search was still on, but nothing had been found. "I don't understand," Jack said to his partner, Ann. "We don't even have a track to follow, which is more than weird."

Captain Jack Lantern was the most difficult and stubborn partner Ann had ever worked with. She'd had many partners over the years, some of whom had made her skin crawl, but Jack was the top of the crap heap. Ann dreaded going into work every day. However, for all Jack's faults, she had to admit he was one hell of a good cop.

"We might be going about this all wrong," Ann said as she scanned the ground with her hand-held repeater, a device that rotated through the entire light spectrum as it searched for evidence. "Maybe this is a life-form our scientists haven't yet identified. It could be our first evidence of a being with the ability to fly."

"We've been on this planet for over a century and never yet found anything that could fly,"

Jack snapped, setting Ann's temper flaring again.

"Look, you ass, no tracks means no tracks. If flight isn't possible, then what?" Ann tried to compose herself. It was just another day at work, after all.

Several hours passed at the spot by the creek where Shane had disappeared before something caught Jack's attention. He knelt, then went flat on his belly. He called for Ann to join him and pointed out faint depressions in the soil, most now covered by searchers' boot prints.

"Well, I'll be go to hell!" Ann gasped. "I see them now too. The repeater didn't see them, though."

"Told you those machines are shit! Good old eyes can't be beat," Jack said.

Ann bit her lip. Man, she hated this guy. But admired him, too.

"We'll go west. I think I can follow the tracks. Whatever it is, it can't weigh more than five or six pounds," Jack said with smug confidence.

"Five or six pounds? And it picked up a girl who weighs a hundred and fifty pounds?" Ann said sarcastically.

Jack ignored Ann and headed west. He was so focused on the tracks that he walked headfirst into a nearly invisible flying saucer. Ann saw the blurred shape of the object as they approached, but didn't bother to warn Jack.

As Jack methodically ran his hand over the misty traces of the outline, Ann radioed back to command base to tell of their discovery. As he tried to understand what it was they had found, Jack's fingers touched on a control surface that deactivated the stealth field. With the full shape and size of the craft now exposed, Jack commented, "Can't be more than fifteen feet across. Couldn't hold many people."

Ann replied, "I'm guessing it has to be empty. If something was in it, we would know by now."

"Not necessarily," retorted Jack. He suspected that the young girl might be inside, and the owner of the craft might be unaware that the stealth field was off. "We need to secure our position and wait for reinforcements. This could be more dangerous than it looks."

Soon several trucks arrived. Soldiers secured the area, then hoisted the craft onto a flatbed and drove it back to a secure bunker in the city. Within hours, scientists were examining the craft and trying to come up with a few theories.

Though the descendants of the original crew of experts from the USS Rothschild had established a well-ordered and high-functioning society on Crest, they were very primitive in all aspects of defense and offense as compared to Earth.

The people of Crest had never encountered the people of Mahoud and their Taskers, who had attacked Earth. They had never battled the Grays and had no knowledge of what Earth had experienced, because their forebears had stopped communicating with the home world long before they arrived on the planet. Moreover, their advancements in weaponry were entirely based on Earth's old technology, without the benefit of back engineering stolen alien technology.

Meanwhile, the occupant of the small craft remained hidden and safe. It chose to use its advanced technology to observe and study the humans.

The scientists discovered that the surface of the craft was a metallic compound and, as there appeared to be no doorway into the craft, cutting tools were tried. Several attempts failed to gain access.

It was Jack who suggested what might work. The ship was left in the bunker and the scientists and military retreated, pretending to abandon the project. Jack and his colleagues waited, observing from hidden locations, to see what might emerge from the craft.

Four days of quiet, then, "Look there! I told you!" blurted Jack as a portion of the craft's surface seemed to evaporate, exposing an entrance into the craft. The small alien emerged and began exploring the room which housed its craft. It examined and tested several instruments the scientists had deliberately left behind in order to try to find a pattern that might establish an intelligence level.

Jack had surmised they might only ever get one chance to secure this alien, and so several levels of assault had been planned. The first and most obvious one was to block access to the craft's door, to cut off escape for the alien. Soldiers rushed into the room, setting off flash explosives and creating as much noise as possible, to throw off the senses of the alien. Then a second team entered the craft and plugged the hole with metal beams and steel plates, barring re-entrance.

The alien screamed. It appeared to fly into a panic, lashing out and tossing soldiers aside with ease. They tried a net, gas, and even robotic constraints, but all failed to secure the creature. It moved about the room freely, the humans simply unable to stop it.

Jack had a final trick to try, and quickly implemented it before the alien could get any closer to its craft. The planet's original inhabitants had discovered a strange mat-plant which lay motionless on the ground until some animal stepped on it. Without warning, the plant mat would emit a tremendous shock, like an eel on steroids, shocking and stunning the prey. Then it would close up on all sides, entombing the victim. A few humans had died before they learned that these plants must be avoided.

Jack had obtained one of these plant mats and carefully placed it in front of the craft's entrance. It worked. The alien was both stunned and entombed before it had any idea what was happening. The teams quickly locked the alien inside a prison cage and released it from the mat. Before they started examining this prize, they explored the alien's small craft.

The lead team that had first rushed the craft and secured the doorway from closing was the first to witness what was concealed in a small, locked room in the lower section of the two-level craft: the remains of the young captive, Shane. Word spread quickly that Shane had been eviscerated and exsanguinated. The process used on Shane looked to be the same as humans used on livestock, but she had not been eaten. Many felt enraged and advocated torturing the now captive alien, but this notion was soon quelled. The creature had died in its cage before anything could happen.

"Curious," Jack commented to Ann as they viewed the alien's body being examined by forensic pathologists. The steel table in the medical facility loomed large compared to the small size of the deceased alien.

Ann muttered a wordless response, a mixture of non-interest and unwillingness to engage in conversation she was sure would be frustrating at best.

Jack went on, hoping not to agitate his partner, but to include her. "I'm guessing this alien was female, middle-aged and walked with a slight limp on the right. It possibly ate vegetables, making it herbivorous, and had an aversion to direct sunlight. Moreover, there are small impressions in its skull that suggest some type of biomechanical interface exists."

There was a moment of silence, then Ann finally relented. "How the hell did you come to that conclusion? How can you think it's female when there are no visible genitalia? It's old because of some wrinkles? How can you determine the length of stride from here and, without a measuring device, determine gait and limping? I can't see its teeth, or if it even has teeth, so determining its diet is nonsense. The skin tone is gray, but what the hell does that have to do with sunlight? And the thing has a big, round, bulbous head. Who knows what's inside that?" The

outburst relieved Ann of her pent-up frustrations.

"Good to see you were paying attention. I always feel like you're ignoring me," Jack replied. "I just made all that up to get you to think. The truth is, I don't even believe that thing was alive. I think it's a robot or something."

Flushed with new anger, Ann was ready to blast her partner when the pathologist announced the findings over the intercom. "After careful attention to details, I can only conclude that this is not a living organism, or at least, not a living organism as we understand the definition."

"See, told you, it's a robot!" Jack said smugly.

"You're such an ass!" Ann blurted.

"Maybe, but I bet it's a robot," Jack responded. Pressing the intercom button, Jack asked the pathologist, "Doc, is it a robot?"

"Well, I suppose that's possible, but if so, it's a highly sophisticated biomechanical robot. Some internals are certainly synthetic but very advanced."

Jack winked at Ann and smiled.

Ann had no idea how Jack kept coming up with the correct answers. This fascinated and frustrated her, since she was both highly intelligent and jealous. "Okay, I give up. How did you know it was a robot?"

"Well, it's obvious, it's dead!" Before Ann had the opportunity to vent again, Jack continued, "The plant mat sends a bolt of current through its victims, a bolt which stuns, based on weight and skin type. This is done because the plant likes to consume living meat, but this time it had no idea what stepped into the trap. So, the plant mat sent out a bolt of electricity at maximum power which short-circuited the alien, effectively turning it off."

"Turning it off?" repeated Ann.

"Yep, and I bet we could turn it back on," Jack stated with confidence.

Ann just stood there looking at her partner, as he stared through the viewing glass into the medical room that held the remains of the alien. Too bad he was such an irritating human being, since she had to admit that he could well be right.

## Chapter 5 Charger R/T on Crest

Captain Jack Lantern lay on his side in a pool of his own blood, his left arm broken in two places and one leg badly mangled. He stared with his one remaining good eye at the alien as it calmly walked toward him. He had fired at least fifteen rounds of ammunition point blank at this alien and done no damage. Now badly beaten and broken, he fumbled with his remaining few shells as he tried to reload for another attack.

Jack looked over at Ann's dead body, only a few yards from where he now fought for his life. A flush of anger and hatred filled his mind and he let loose a primal yell as he tried desperately to reload. But he was unable to control his broken arm and one of the shells slipped from his fingers and rolled to the feet of the approaching alien.

The alien interrupted its sedate progress, picked up the shotgun shell Jack had dropped and calmly handed it back to him, confident that the weapon would have no impact on its repulse field. Jack's spirit sagged at the audacity of the alien. The aliens were so superior in technology that nothing the humans did could defeat them.

Then Jack remembered that he was lying with his body against the town's power plant and, in the confusion, had pulled a high voltage power line within his reach. With a great effort, Jack grabbed the power line and touched it to the shotgun shell in the alien's outstretched hand. The resulting shock ignited the round, exploding and blowing off the alien's arm. It reeled back in pain as precious bodily fluids rushed from its body. Within seconds, it lay dead at Jack's mangled feet.

When Jack regained consciousness, the sounds of gunfire and fighting had stopped. The battle had been lost and now the aliens were rounding up prisoners and loading them onto spaceships, along with the dead bodies of Crest's humans. He could hear cries for help and pleas for mercy. Jack felt the helplessness of his situation press down on his will to fight and, for a moment, almost gave up.

Then he caught sight of the Battle Mech across from him. The Battle Mech was a one-off construct that the military had been working on, a fully contained fighting suit, armored, mechanized, and life sustaining. It took Jack almost a half hour to drag his broken body to the front hatch of the suit and another half hour before he achieved total integration with the weapons and with the controls which provided painless support for his broken limbs.

Like a one-man tank, the Battle Mech whined and clicked to life, giving Jack one last chance to fight back. Splayed out on five legs and with a variety of guns and rocket launchers at the ready, the Battle Mech walked to the landing strip where the aliens were preparing to launch. Jack rushed on board the nearest ship, hoping to continue the fight. Undetected, he made his way silently to the cargo area, where he freed prisoners from spherical cages that hung like drops of water from the ceiling. These twelve people wanted to continue the fight as much as he did and, with Jack in the Battle Mech, felt confident that they could overwhelm the aliens and take control of the spacecraft.

"Wait, we can't just start shooting up the place," Jack said, as he tried to control the small group. "If we're in orbit, a stray bullet could pierce the hull and that would kill us all."

When the aliens had begun their attack on planet Crest, the human civilian and military leaders were not at all prepared for what they faced. It started with a few days of strange sounds resonating from the sky, apparently from no specific direction. Then things went quiet for a few days until the thunderous booms began, a booming so loud that human eardrums bled, and many

people were knocked unconscious. Then came quiet again and, finally, a full out invasion. The leaders of the colony were so rattled that no real resistance was mounted to defend the small city. The alien forces swiftly took advantage of the disorder and resistance was destroyed almost at once. It took less than a week for the humans to realize the fight was hopeless.

The scientists who had been examining the captured alien had indeed reactivated it, as Jack had guessed might happen. What none of them realized was that this reanimation led to the alien broadcasting its location and situation to nearby alien battle ships on a scouting mission to Earth.

The human colony on planet Crest had been wiped out. The aliens had slaughtered those who resisted and imprisoned those who did not. Jack and the other twelve survivors onboard the spaceship faced an impossible task. To gain their freedom, they would not only have to kill their oppressors but also try to figure out their technology.

"Even if we do find a way to kill them, we still need to understand how to fly this craft," Jack growled to several overzealous freed prisoners. With the craft now in space, even a single mistake could result in everyone dying. The Battle Mech suit was equipped with a small stealthy drone capable of limited flight so, like a winged spider, the micro-drone took to the air and began silently navigating around the craft.

Images from the drone were relayed back to Jack in the Battle Mech suit and he, in turn, displayed the images to the other members of his small group. The micro-drone flew down hallways and through open doors until it reached the command center of the ship, where it found three aliens plugged into the craft's console like computers plugged into a network hub.

"Well, this is odd." Jack was puzzled. The aliens appeared to be dormant.

"So, if we kill them, will we be stuck in space?" asked a young girl, who looked about fifteen years old. She was pale and sweating with fear. Another member of the group tried to console her.

"I'm not stupid!" said the young girl sharply. "I get it. These aliens are plugged into the ship and, if we kill them, we'll lose the ability to fly."

"Settle down," Jack said calmly, "I have an idea."

"Do you really have an idea?" whispered a tall, skinny man.

"I'm working on one," Jack whispered back. The group floundered about the cargo hold for some time, looking for possible weapons as well as clues to the construction and function of the spacecraft, and discussing possible ways to take control.

The man who had whispered to Jack was called Abarth. He had often been seen walking around the town, a ragged old character with a friendly smile and a quick joke for whoever took time to listen. He didn't seem to have a home, and no one was really sure where he came from.

"I have an idea," Abarth said. "If we rush the three Gray pilots of this craft, I bet that mechanical suit you're wearing could be plugged into the controls. That would give you the ability to fly this thing and get us out of here."

"Gray pilots?" Jack said. "How do you know what these aliens are called? Or are you just guessing because of their color?"

Abarth's smile did not reach his eyes. "A good guess, don't you agree?"

"Sure! What's in a name, after all? But why do you think our technology would be compatible with theirs?"

"Well, it's obvious. They look like us. Two hands, two feet, two eyes, and I bet they even do things like us," Abarth responded, much too quickly and enthusiastically for Jack's comfort.

"Can't hurt to try anyway. We will either succeed or die sometime down the road. I say we have a good chance to survive, and we should try!"

The other members of the small party agreed with this ragged old man and Jack had to agree that they needed to act, not just wait, hoping for a miracle.

They made their way to the bridge of the craft. Since the three Grays had no active personal repulse field, it was easy to kill them silently and quickly. Then, as Abarth had suggested, Jack plugged a communications cable into the soft, spongy console of the ship and, miraculously, found he had full control of the craft.

Too good to be true! Jack's suspicions of Abarth were confirmed. Something was very wrong.

He didn't advertise his suspicions. Instead, he quickly turned the ship's weapons on the other Gray ships and disabled them with little effort. Five of the small craft now hung in space motionless, containing the sole remaining humans from planet Crest.

As Jack wondered how to free the prisoners on the other ships, it appeared to happen spontaneously. The prisoners on every ship established communication and reported that they had killed all the Grays. The members of Jack's small party were very impressed. Jack himself made no comment. He wanted to believe what he had heard but he was too clever a cop to trust even his own ears. He had to find out what this old man called Abarth was up to. Not to mention how and why.

"We should not return to Crest," Abarth said. "The Grays might catch on to what's happened and come looking for us."

Jack considered this. "Well, what would you suggest we do?"

"You're plugged into this ship. It must have records of habitable planets near us."

Jack didn't believe Abarth's statements, not even for a moment. But he would go along with the game for now. "Well, let's have a look in the ship's memory then." After a moment, he said, "Look, the ship says there is a planet just a few hours from here. What are the chances?"

Abarth exclaimed, "Well, what are we waiting here for?" The freed prisoners responded with excitement.

The other ships had miraculously self-repaired, and Jack was able to control and safely land them on a planet with breathable air, fresh water, and green trees. To Jack's surprise, no one else seemed to share his suspicions of Abarth.

As soon as he had a moment to himself and with no one looking on, he released the Battle Mech's constraints and flopped to the ground. His broken leg and arm hurt, and his one good eye saw blood still dripping from his damaged eye. "Well," he mumbled to himself, "Guess that proves I'm not dead or dreaming. But what's happening here?" He thought for some time and finally gave up, stumped. Nothing made sense.

Jack struggled back into the suit, which gave him mobility, and went back to the large group. They were busy building shelters and gathering wood for fires, and everywhere Jack went, they were quick to thank him for the rescue.

Jack sat by himself, thinking of the terrible way Ann had died and how unrealistic this situation seemed. The young girl from Jack's ship came and sat with him.

"I'm Rebecca and my mom calls me Becky, but I hate that name. Are we dead?"

This question was the first hint that Jack might not be alone in his suspicions. "What made you ask that?" Jack offered cautiously, not wanting to let slip what he suspected.

"Well, things don't seem real. I can't believe you were able to control those ships and find a perfect planet. No offence meant, but you don't seem smart enough."

Rebecca's brash honesty impressed Jack but hurt his ego. He replied, "Well, I think I'm smart enough to know we're not dead."

"That's a relief," Rebecca said as she worried at a fingernail.

They sat for another long period, not talking, then Jack asked, "You any good at math?"

"No, not really," Rebecca responded. She was now shoving the finger with its broken nail in her mouth, gnawing on the colored tip.

"Too bad. I could really use some help with the math," Jack replied.

"Your suit has a computer. Just ask it; that's what I do at home."

Her response seemed so innocent and honest that Jack couldn't bring himself to admit he was teasing her. He was only trying to be silly, but the joke was lost on this kid. He said, "Well, Rebecca, how about we go try to find some answers? You with me?"

"Sure, I got nothing else to do," Rebecca said cheerfully.

"Okay, kid, let's track over to a ship and have a look about." The two made their way to the nearest ship, slipped onboard and tried operating the controls as Jack had done before. This time, though, there was no response from the alien craft.

Jack said, "Just as I suspected. The magic is gone."

"These things run on magic?" Rebecca responded in a disbelieving tone.

"No, that's just an expression," Jack replied as he pulled the communications cord from the craft's control panel.

"Maybe we should just do the same thing the Gray aliens did." Rebecca walked up to where the Grays had been sitting and shoved her small hands into the soft, pliable gloves attached to the armrests of the chair.

Nothing happened and Rebecca sighed heavily. Ready to give up, she started pulling her hands from the gloves. As her hands became visible, Rebecca reacted violently. Thousands of small white filaments were bonded to her fingers and but still held fast to the gloves. Rebecca frantically tried to free herself and Jack was quick to help, but no matter how they struggled, they could not break her hands free. The white filaments crept up her arms, ensnaring her. She began to cry.

Jack was panicking. Try as he might to prevent it, the filaments were beginning to cover Rebecca's entire body. In desperation, Jack shot the control panel, hoping that causing damage might have a result. The gunfire caught the attention of the other members of the group, who rushed to the craft.

They found Rebecca fully encased in the white filaments and being devoured as Jack fought to save her. Others tried to help free the girl, but as they made contact with her, they themselves became entangled. Five members of the group were trapped, and it took several long agonizing minutes for the saucer to fully digest the humans. All the others could do was watch in horror.

However, it seemed that the saucer had little taste for Jack's Battle Mech suit. The composite metals apparently could not be digested. After everyone had vacated the ship, Jack vented his frustration and anger by launching several missiles and firing hundreds of rounds into the saucer. The violence utterly destroyed the craft. "The damn things are alive!" Jack shouted as the rest of the group tried to console one another. Jack attacked the second craft and then a third, seeking revenge but, when he approached the fourth, Abarth stopped him.

"Get the fuck out of my way, old man!" Jack snapped.

This pleased Abarth, for he desperately sought the fierce, violent, true nature of humanity. This was the untouched and untainted humanity of the early twenty-first century, the humanity he had been taught about in school, the humanity eager to kill. Like a vampire of myth, Abarth relished and felt elation at the brutal nature of primitive mankind.

"We will need the remaining crafts if we are to travel back to Earth," Abarth said. The

expression on his face made it seem as though he were enjoying some perverted sexual pleasure from the human sorrow.

"Back to Earth!" shouted Jack, his one good eye firmly affixed to Abarth. "Are you mad? We can't travel that distance in these little saucers. No air, no food, no water. What the hell are you thinking?" Jack was shouting so fiercely that even Abarth backed away for a second.

"It is important that some of us get to Earth, to warn the planet," Abarth responded at once, obviously trying to sway the others to support him.

"We have no idea how fast these saucers travel in space. We have no idea how to keep anyone alive in them and, most important, it appears I can no longer interface with the ship's controls. So, if you have some bright ideas about how to solve these problems, please enlighten me." Jack was hoping to rattle Abarth. He'd been a cop for a long time and thought a little pressure might crack the strange old man.

Abarth was smooth. He had a way of twisting truth into lies that sounded palatable for the desperate. "If we just wait, one of the Gray ships will return, looking for their missing friends. My guess is that it will be a bigger transport ship that comes and, if we are smart, we can kill them quickly and steal their craft."

This half-assed, improbable plan made sense to the rest of the people, since they were desperate for some way to fight back. "When they arrive, we will board the two saucers we have and fly into the mother ship. We can then fight our way to the control center and kill the Grays. Then we'll fly to Earth and warn the planet." Abarth was riding high on the responses from the others. They eagerly agreed with his idea mostly because the idea of going to Earth, their ancestral home, was too much to resist.

"How can you not hear me?" Jack retorted. "I just told you I can't control these ships!"

"You weren't doing it right. I will show you how it's done."

Abarth's calm demeanor and obvious lies were really beginning to wear on Jack, but he could see he had no support from the others. They would do anything to stay alive. Or, to keep on believing that they could stay alive.



The sudden explosion on the surface of the planet was violent, catching everyone off guard. The ground rippled and shook.

The explosion was the result of a time rip. Scientists had said over and over that time travel was a fallacy. But Abarth had found a way. Or rather, his friend Jet found a way. He had sent Abarth back in time using a time rip.

Charger R/T now arrived using the same method. He had long been on the heels of this mass murderer and was fiercely determined to put an end to the madman. He rose from his crouched position, the perfect image of a vicious demon twisted with hate and vengeance. All around him, the ground was blasted and distorted.

The only one to understand what the explosion meant was Abarth. He knew because he'd caused the same kind of explosion when he landed on an isolated area of Crest. The fear in his eyes showed Jack clearly how bad things were. "What is it? What do you know, old man?" Jack asked as he grabbed Abarth's arm.

"We have to go now!" shouted a panicking Abarth, his fear almost palpable. "Board the ships, board the ships!"

The small group of survivors rushed about, confused and afraid. Jack was not inclined to

believe this latest event, whatever it was. He started a radar scan of the area to search for whatever Abarth seemed so afraid of, but he had no luck detecting anything.

Charger R/T, moving like a blur, traveled from the site of the explosion to stand in front of Jack, his beastly grotesque form towering over the man.

Jack was astonished and tripped over himself retreating, but managed to hit Charger R/T with hundreds of rounds of gunfire. This did not stop Charger R/T's advance. He simply walked past Jack, calm and cool, directly toward Abarth.

"Help me!" Abarth yelled repeatedly, and the survivors were grabbing any weapon they could to help a fellow human. All they understood was that an ugly demon was attacking an old man, and the instinct to protect their own took effect.

Time seemed to slow as Charger R/T advanced on a retreating Abarth. Jack used the Battle Mech suit to further attack Charger R/T from different angles, hoping to find a weakness he could exploit. For a brief moment, the demon stopped, looked directly into Jack's one good eye, growled like a rabid dog, and then lunged at Abarth.

Charger R/T had been waiting for this moment for a long time and he decided to destroy Abarth by completely disassembling the man at the molecular level, then scattering the molecules to every point in the galaxy. With modern technology, Abarth could have reassembled himself on this particular timeline, though it might have taken him millions of years to do so. However, such a feat was impossible. He had traveled back in time nearly two thousand years. But technology could not travel back through time. Only bodies and minds could make that journey.

Charger R/T emitted an extraordinary flash of light, temporarily blinding most of the survivors. Caught in Charger R/T's two great hands, Abarth was compressed and crushed, his long bones cracking and breaking under the compaction, his ribs snapping like small twigs. Abarth's one visible eye stared fearfully into the milky white eyes of Charger R/T's distorted face. Abarth's entire body, now squashed to the size of a soccer ball, reflected in Charger R/T's eyes for Abarth to witness before he disintegrated.

A rage of deafening noise erupted from Charger R/T, and a blast of heat so powerful that everyone near him felt burning air in their lungs. In a blazing flash of white-hot light, Abarth was destroyed and only Charger R/T remained standing.

In the Battle Mech suit, Jack was relatively unhurt but confused. He asked Charger R/T, "What are you?" He knew there was something badly wrong with Abarth's actions, and felt no sorrow about the old man's fate. And he was sure that asking a creature like Charger R/T a question was just plain shell shock. So he was dumbfounded when the demon answered.

"I have been hunting for Abarth for many years. He is a wanted criminal, responsible for the deaths of billions."

"How is that even possible?" Jack stumbled over his words, trying to ignore the growing pain he felt.

"I am from your future. And also from your past," Charger R/T responded calmly.

The survivors on the ground, all suffering and many close to death, begged Charger R/T, "Can you help us?"

"No. You are already dead." Charger R/T replied.

Now that Abarth was gone, the effects of his mental trickery were diminishing rapidly. The illusion he had created of a beautiful and friendly world began to fade. The world underneath the mask was revealing itself as intensely hostile toward human life.

The suffering was brief. Jack and the others were rapidly consumed in the many ways this

planet could kill humans, leaving only Charger R/T to stand upon its surface.

"Alone at last," Charger R/T muttered as he sat down. He could have used his powers to save these people, to relieve them of their suffering and pain, but he chose not to help. No humans had ever helped him.

Charger R/T sat for several months on this turbulent world, the great mass of his body peaceful and calm. However, a war raged in his mind. He had long believed that modern humanity surpassed him in ability, but with the demise of Abarth, a question began forming in his scattered thoughts. Was it really true that he now possessed the powers of a god? Could he change the future? Should he try?

Charger R/T slowly rose to his feet and walked to a Gray space saucer. He boarded the craft and decided to fly it to planet Crest. The craft offered no resistance and began the transit.

But, halfway to Crest, it stopped.

Charger R/T had finally come to accept that he did, in fact, have the powers of a god. To test his belief, he dematerialized from the craft and re-materialized on Crest.

Yes!

He was a god. A powerful god. He could blink to wherever he wanted to go.

Could he also blink to whenever he wanted to go?

But before he tried an experiment with time, he decided to spend a few days on Crest, and see where his mind took him.

Weeks later, Charger R/T was still walking the streets of the military encampment on planet Crest, restless and frustrated. Far in the future, where he had come from, humans no longer had the backbone to defend themselves and that task had fallen to Charger R/T. This was the usual order of things for him; he was always the weapon mankind used and then blamed.

As he walked the silent, deserted streets, unaware that a rescue ship named Loki was at that very moment traveling toward the planet, an idea occurred to him. The thought was just a whisper from some dark recess of his mind, for Charger R/T functioned more on instinct than intellect. Not knowing where this whisper originated, and because it was something never before experienced, Charger R/T took a moment to listen.

What he heard was a plan for repentance, a way of making things right, a chance to redeem himself. He could go find the soldiers the Grays had captured, and free them. For this action, he might be rewarded, and humanity might not condemn him so readily. The Grays would be no match for him. Their ships could not have gone very far, and he had now learned the ability and the power of a blink. Just pick a direction, he thought, and blink to the Grays' marauding ships.

But Charger R/T had not yet learned how to search the stars with his mind. Instead, he set off blinking in a direction he only guessed might be right. His instincts were off, and the universe is vast beyond comprehension.



What the Grays did to the human soldiers they captured on planet Crest went beyond disturbing. It was cruel and sick.

Burt regained consciousness after being captured by the Grays and taken aboard the main space craft. He found himself tied to a platform. The room was dark and smelled musky, and his lungs burned as he breathed in the air. "Is anyone there?" he called out. There was no answer. Burt struggled hard against his restraints, hoping to break free, but they held fast. "Hey! You there, wake up!" Burt shouted into the darkened room, trying to rouse the other two people he

thought were in the room with him.

His free hand felt around the surface on which he lay and found it wet and sticky. He found he could turn his head, but not lift it from the surface of the platform. Frustrated and angry, Burt decided to force the issue. With every ounce of strength, he tried to lift his head. It took several long arduous moments, but the restraints began to give and slowly Burt managed to look around. What greeted his eyes caused him to scream in fear. Floating above his chest were his internal organs, still active and working. He realized the wetness he felt was his own blood.

The two forms moved toward him, and Burt realized they were Grays, not humans. They held devices that looked metallic but moved in their hands as if alive. "Get the fuck away from me!" Burt yelled as he thrashed about on the table.

Burt was powerfully built, a dedicated military man who had endured many years in combat. As one Gray neared, it made the mistake of getting too close to Burt's loose hand. He grabbed the Gray and pulled it to the table, fighting with it for the metallic object it held. As the Gray retreated, Burt grabbed the object. He forced it against his restraints and found that it cut like a knife. The Grays moved to grab Burt, but it was too late. He was free. He lashed out at the Gray, slamming its head hard into the table, killing it. He then turned the device on the remaining Gray, which was trying to retreat, ramming it hard into the fleeing Gray's back. It collapsed to the floor and lay still.

Burt's intestines and lungs floated before him due to the zero gravity. He carefully returned the organs into his broken chest and bandaged it. Then he realized he felt no pain. The Grays must have done something to make him numb. Not knowing how long this would last, or when he might die, he decided to free all the soldiers he could find.

Eventually he found a tunnel out of the room, which led to another room where he killed two more Grays. On a table lay two soldiers who had been bonded together. The Grays had left them only a single heart, a single set of lungs and kidneys. But they were alive, and he revived and freed them. Though suffering shock, they were determined to follow Burt.

The three found another tunnel and floated along it until they entered a large room. Several soldiers hung from hooks, like meat. These men and women were also in various stages of sickening deconstruction, but alive. The group realized that the air they were breathing was antiseptic and sustaining their biological needs, so they took heart and regrouped.

They would take this ship in space and kill its occupants, but they had no idea how large the craft was or how many Grays were aboard. Like zombies, twisted and broken, the soldiers found and freed other humans, killing as many Grays as they could find. Anything that fit in the hand became a weapon, and the fury of these experimental subjects carried them inexorably forward.

The group became twenty strong, a sickening sight to behold. Some were missing limbs, some had limbs stitched to others, one had two heads, both functioning. The group, searching for more soldiers, stumbled into a room with dormant Gray soldiers which suddenly burst to life. The Grays fought against the restraints that kept them from floating free, trying to fight back. The humans instantly attacked. The Grays struggled to retrieve their technologically superior weapons, while the desperate humans used anything at hand to kill. The carnage was intense. Burt, with four others, survived the fight and continued the search.

Meanwhile, Charger R/T found himself appearing and disappearing in the cold black depths of space as he searched for the Grays' ship. Not knowing which direction they had gone, he blinked at random for a long time. Then the voice in his head whispered again, very distant, giving a direction. Charger R/T thought it couldn't hurt to follow what the voice said and, with one blink, found himself aboard the Grays' craft.

He appeared in the central command area occupied by hundreds of Grays operating the ship as it traversed the void of space. Shocked by Charger's sudden appearance, the Grays reacted violently.

"Shit!" Charger R/T snarled, as twenty small Grays instantly clung to every part of his anatomy. Shaking them off like flies, Charger tried to find a stable surface to stand on so he could fight. For every one Gray he threw off, two would return. A boiling rage rose in Charger R/T's mind and, not knowing how he did it, he created a gravity field around himself, anchoring his feet to a solid surface. With that action, the fight really began. Charger R/T was like a wild animal, tearing and ripping the bodies of Grays apart with brutal efficiency.

Alarms rang out and more Grays rushed into the command center to defend the ship, allowing Burt time to find and free more soldiers. They floated down corridors trying to find the command center and killing any Gray that crossed their path. Burt entered one room and found a lone Gray which seemed to be communicating with something. Burt attacked and prevailed. The Gray had been in communication with his home world, explaining the events. The home world Grays witnessed the fight on their video screens and were appalled and angry over the brutality of what they saw. At once, the Grays vowed to have their revenge on humanity.

Meanwhile, Charger R/T was mopping up the last few Grays trying to kill him. Now, with the craft firmly in Charger R/T's control, he looked out the viewing port and, in the distance, saw two more great craft moving along with the one he now stood in.

Burt was stunned as he and the others entered the command room. The sight of possibly two hundred dead Grays scattered in pieces about the room was horrible. In the center of the large room stood a terrifying beast, wild-eyed and breathing hard.

"Holy crap!" was all Burt could manage to blurt before Charger R/T glared at the soldiers. The soldiers began retreating, not wanting to tangle with such a strange and ferocious-looking demon.

"Figures," Charger R/T said. He snorted, then blinked to the other nearest ship. The remaining ships with their crews of Grays stood no chance against his attack. He littered the decks with their dead. The humans he found were just as twisted and broken and fearful of him as any he had seen before.

Charger R/T had the power to save the humans but now felt little interest in doing so. Realizing yet again that he would never be accepted, he blinked to the area just beyond the three ships sitting motionless in the great void. Not really sure how he did it, he drew his hands slowly together, using some massive internal power, and crushed the three ships into a single, tiny point of matter.

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#### **DART SPEAKS TO READER:**

You got it, didn't you, Reader? It seems impossible that Abarth could have been on Crest in 2205 during the first attack by the Grays when he wasn't born until 3540 on New Eden? And how could Charger R/T be chasing him when Charger R/T didn't meet Abarth until a hundred years after that, in 3640?

Well, you're right, of course. Time travel! Abarth learned how to travel back in time, and he landed on Crest, trying to escape from Charger R/T, who was determined to track and kill him.

No, Abarth being destroyed in 2205 didn't affect what happened on New Eden during the following fourteen hundred years, because that was a different timeline. Abarth disappeared from

that particular timeline, of course, when Jet sent him into the past, and created a new timeline for himself on Crest. That timeline was brief and ended forever when Charger R/T destroyed him.

How much of that scene on Crest was real? Oh, everything that happened on Crest was real. Jack's Battle Mech suit existed, and he did board the Gray ship. The friendly planet was an illusion created by Abarth. It's hard to say about all the other things that happened. Abarth had great powers, so some of it was illusion.

Yes, Charger R/T's arrival was real. So was his destruction of Abarth.

No, Abarth couldn't fly the spaceship. Only the mind and body can travel back in time. He didn't have the technology to fly a spaceship. But Charger R/T could. Charger R/T was the only exception to that rule, for his arrival back in time was as a recreated being. He didn't have our modern technology, but he did have the powers of a god.

I agree, it is ironic that Jack, for a brief time, felt as if he was a hero. Feeling like a hero is a kind of illusion in itself.

Okay, I'll explain the time rip. It's a one-way trip for anyone capable of figuring out the process. You can go forward or backward in time to any point, but you travel to a dead end if you go back in time. This is a mechanical problem. You need technology to send you back or forward, but you can't take the technology with you, so if you go back, that's where you're stuck, because no time machine exists. It might be different if you're going ahead in time because technology always expands and improves.

What about the Dark Ages on Earth? Don't be a smart-ass, Reader.

Now, the time rip is best described as a rip current, like the oceanic rip tide everyone's heard about, or maybe experienced. Time is a process of Einstein's Theory of Relativity, where space contracts and time dilates. However, sometimes there is too much time distorted by gravity, and time thus has the ability to flow backward, much like a rip current. In a rip current, the water crashes on the shore, but cannot stay on the shore and must return to the greater body of water, so it gathers and forces a narrow path out until it reaches beyond the breakers. And the same is true for time.

Yes, it's perhaps a little hard to grasp. It was the discovery of the great minds of science in the time of Abarth's existence. The discovery of hidden elements of the universe also led to the discovery of a quantum locked particle. This was an extremely rare subatomic particle that existed outside of time constraints, a single particle that existed when the universe first started and will still exist when the universe dies. A particle that exists at all points of time in space exists eternally, and the people of Abarth's time period discovered how to use it.

The scientists had theorized that if one used the drive engine from the world ship and, instead of locking on to a quantum entangled particle, they accessed a quantum locked particle, they could in theory send information to a different point in time and reassemble the information there.

Yes, that means that a clone of a human could be built at some destination in time, and the information or mind of that human would be sent to the clone, thus destroying the initial traveler. In the case of Abarth, he could only send his essence or being to the end point clone. He could not send the products of his technology, and so he arrived at the destination as just a man, without advanced technology, but with knowledge of the future.

Yes, that's it exactly! Abarth was like the magician who could, through illusion, cause the elephant in the room to disappear, but he could do no more than that. The only problem with this technology was the destructive violence of pulling a quantum locked particle back into the time stream. The traveler survives but very little at the point of destination remains.

Reader, it seems to me that a long time ago I promised to tell you more about Charger R/T bouncing through time. You already know that his landing on Earth, just as the Mahoud invasion started, saved Danny's life, which was important because Danny went on to become world president. And now you've heard about how he dealt with Abarth.

But there was a third incident. Way back, almost at the beginning of the story, when the Mahouds started developing the black, hollow world of Neo Terra into a paradise, they heard an explosion which was eventually dismissed as a quake. But that was Charger R/T, landing near the laboratory where the Mahouds were developing more advanced Taskers. It was Charger R/T who added the hidden code to the Taskers, the code which would eventually allow them to 'decide,' to become semi-human Taskoids.

And why did he do that? Because, at the time the Prime resurrected Charger in order to clone him into super-soldiers to defeat the Grays, he inserted the command when he programmed Charger RT's mind.

Yes, it's a circle, a loop. A universe inside a universe. Think about it. If we have time, we can talk about it later.

## Chapter 6 Second attack on Crest

### DART SPEAKS TO READER:

Now we've come to the part in the story where my mother, Reanna, enters the history of Crest.

The second ship sent to Crest, the Loki, left Earth in 2065, with Gin and little Reanna aboard. Two hundred and fifty Earth years passed before they reached Crest, which would have made it 2315 in Earth time when they arrived.

How could Reanna still be alive then? Because time passes more slowly in space than it does on Earth. And don't forget the cryo pods.



Reanna would have been ten years of age according to Earth time, if the ship Loki had reached Crest as planned. But this didn't happen. Now, at thirty-four and with both parents dead, Reanna had few memories of childhood and the good times it meant for most children. Instead, she lived in a small world of constant fear. The Earth ship Loki had followed its course flawlessly toward Crest, picking up the trail of small satellite communication relays held in safe orbits leading toward their destination. However, there had been no communication from the Crest colony after the Mahoud-Earth War started and everyone assumed communication had been turned off for Crest's protection. The truth was much more disturbing.

Like following a trail of breadcrumbs, the Loki hunted down every satellite, right into the path of an undetected space distortion. This distortion sent the Loki and its crew helplessly across a vast distance in space. Loki was a large ship, holding five highly trained families made up of ten adults and fifteen youths under the age of sixteen. As the ship had entered service after the Mahoud-Earth War, part of its design was based on the invaders' technology. Taskers had not been included, but their cryogenic pods were. The ten-year mission was well stocked and prepared, but a space distortion had never been considered as a possible scenario.

After a year of ship time in a layer of space that seemed like an out-of-control river at full flood, the Loki emerged back into the steady blackness of deep space, now with five people fewer than when it had started. It took months of painstaking research to decipher where in space the ship had been flung. The answer left all members of the party severely disillusioned.

The ship kept the remainder of its human passengers safe and asleep as it plied the vastness of space for two hundred and fifty years, until it reached Crest. The families had expected time in the cryo pods to seem brief. The ship's controls were automated and, until they reached their destination, they would age at one-tenth the normal rate, safe in the ship. Reanna had entered stasis at age nine, and expected to emerge at Crest ten years later, aged ten. So, to emerge at age thirty-four was devastating.

And there was no welcome. The Loki arrived on a dead world.

All the buildings and functions were perfectly intact, but devoid of human life. The survivors from the Loki might have prospered, but the loss of so much time and the shock of arriving at a world bereft of human life was hard to bear. Within a month of arrival, three more members had been lost to the group, all by suicide.

The city on Crest looked as if all the humans had simply evaporated one day. Decayed food still sat on dusty dinner plates. Machinery functioned, but no humans were there. For some time,

the survivors tried to adapt to their surroundings, but the enormity of the situation and the lack of any concrete knowledge about the circumstances led to depression and despair. The first pioneers had left Earth on an eighty-year voyage before the Mahoud attacked, with only the advancements Earth knew at that time. The Loki had technological advancements far beyond what the original pioneers enjoyed, and they found being on this planet similar to landing far back in time. Like twenty-first century people arriving in an 1870s cowboy town of the old west, these survivors found little they could use or understand.

To operate the computers that ran the city on planet Crest, the survivors had to rediscover programming that was as foreign to them as ancient Latin or Greek. However, eventually they learned the original inhabitants' fate.

The inhabitants had captured a Gray alien and discovered that it was a very sophisticated biomechanical robot. The revival of this robot resulted in it contacting the nearby Gray fleet. The people of Crest mounted the best defense they could, which quickly proved futile. After the Grays won the brief battle, they apparently removed every human. The original planetary life forms and those introduced by humans were spared, but what had happened to the humans remained a mystery.

The Loki reached Crest in 2315, about the same time as the Grays destroyed all life on planet Earth during the Night of the Black Rain. Though the survivors of the Loki trip tried to re-establish communication with Earth, there was no one left to answer.

"The ship is capable of returning us to Earth," Reanna said to Deme. Deme was seen as the leader and most fit to command the survivors.

"That's true. We still have an intact drive system, but our power source has been severely depleted, and so only a few could return," Deme replied as he stroked his long graying beard. "I'm not sure how we could decide who is least important to our current situation. And to lose even a few members might be the death of those that remain."

"I agree with Deme," replied a younger man named Jade. Jade had been the engineer aboard Loki and was chiefly responsible for reviving the city on Crest. "With our numbers so few, I think the logical response is to settle in and repopulate." Jade was very matter of fact and unemotional on this point.

"The longer we stay here, the less power we'll have to return," retorted Reanna. She had inherited her grandmother Hanna's intolerance and was short with most people.

During the long flight to Crest, as the families were held in stasis, Loki's computers continued with educating the minds of the crew. However, instruction was provided for only a ten-year flight and, as a result, the survivors suffered a limited education, and some were driven more by emotion than logic.

"I'm not sure I could endure the flight back," Dawn replied nervously. She had been the same age as Reanna when the flight left Earth and seemed to have suffered greatly in stasis. Dawn told stories of horrific dreams, but few believed her. The computers weren't designed to supply dreams. "I think Deme and Jade are right. We should repopulate and later possibly send our children, or their children."

Dawn's comment on the situation was dismissed by Reanna as simple fear, and she pressed on with the argument. "Every year we stay here is a year we lose in travel," Reanna said. "We can plot a course past the distortion now that we know where it is, and so it only makes sense that we return and get more help to solve what happened to the people who were here."

Reanna achieved nothing with her arguments and decided her only option was to launch herself in Loki and travel back to Earth at the first opportunity. It took almost six months of time

on Crest to secretly prepare the Loki and launch at night when everyone was asleep. Reanna intended to spend some during the return trip attempting to re-establish communication with Earth. She left a video recording her reasons for taking the ship, sure the survivors would understand that their best interests were all she cared about. The survivors viewed this deceit with varying degrees of anger.

With the ship's controls set to wake her every six months, so that she could try again to contact Earth, Reanna settled into the cryogenic pod. The Loki was designed to travel in the depths of space at incredible speeds, but this came with equally incredible risks. If something like a large asteroid crossed the flight path, there was little time to react.

Loki's computers constantly adapted to the chosen flight path, but there was no way that this system, or the people on Crest, could have anticipated that the space distortion had the ability to move and constantly found new areas of space to ravage. Loki rushed headlong back into the swiftly moving river of space and was carried off-course yet again, for a very long time.



#### **DART SPEAKS TO READER:**

Yes, the event was catastrophic for Reanna. The emergency procedures responded, and she was trapped in stasis for fourteen hundred years of Earth time.

How old was she really? Well, she'd begun this trip at age nine. With her life stunted by cryogenics, she now found herself being awakened at nearly one hundred and seventy-four years of age, and nowhere near Earth, which is where she had planned to go. The closest human settlement was New Eden. Loki's computers correctly assessed the circumstances and made this its destination.

You can probably do the math yourself, Reader. The Loki arrived at New Eden about 3716, some 75 years after Abarth released Charger R/T, the First Ones, and the god from the time-lock.

Oh, you want to know what happened to the people on Crest before I tell you what else happened to Reanna? All right then, cast your mind back to 2316.



The noise began with a low rumbling, like someone banging a fist on a bunch of piano strings. The eerie sound started small but, after about an hour, resonated so much that several Crest survivors gathered in the street to question one another. Deme was the first to suggest that it might be the Earth ship Loki, returning and trying to land somewhere nearby. However, no ship was visible in the dawn sky, and the resonating sound increased minute by minute. Fear began to replace mere concern.

"I know the sound of the Loki, and that's not it." Jade said to Deme. "It could be mechanical, but it's not the pulse blasts of Loki's landing motors."

Deme listened to Jade but, all the while, he was looking around, trying to pin down where the sound was coming from. As quickly as the sound started, it stopped, leaving frayed nerves quivering. "That's really odd. In the year we've lived here, that's a first. Maybe we still do not fully understand this small planet," Deme said to the rest of the group.

"Well, whatever that was, I'm glad it's over," Dawn replied as she held her newborn daughter tightly in her arms. Jade took Dawn by the arm and the two retreated inside their small home, leaving Deme intently scanning the sky.

Later that same day the sound started again, first as a low hum, then gradually increasing until the ground began to shake slightly. This time everyone was out in the street with instruments, recording the sound and tracking its direction.

"Well, I'm out of ideas," Jade said to Deme as the two men stood close together. "It seems the sound is coming from the sky, as we suspected, but from everywhere at once and not from any one point."

"You do have the orbital tracking system running, right?" Deme asked.

"Oh shit!" exclaimed Jade and bolted back into the office to start the tracker. After a few minutes, Jade returned and stood listening to the weird, resonating sound.

"You're getting old," Deme teased. Jade just grinned and agreed.

Dawn had never been a strong woman. She quickly became unnerved by the sound and tried desperately to find someplace to get away from it with her daughter. After about an hour, the sound stopped again, and Jade found his wife hiding when he returned to their home. He tried to comfort her, but Dawn could not be consoled.

The doctor was called, and he gave Dawn sedatives. Jade then checked his instruments and what they had recorded. Nothing. The sounds had no origin, and no identifiable pattern. Jade worked into the night until exhaustion set in, and he fell asleep in his chair. He awakened next morning to a bloodcurdling scream.

Dawn was screaming for the noise to stop. Jade was confused at first, then noticed the resonating hum had returned. Frustrated and angry, he stormed outside and found Deme preparing a flyer.

"Want to join me in a scouting trip?" Deme asked.

Jade grabbed a helmet and joined his friend. The flyers were small two-person scout ships left over from the military group which set up the original colony on planet Crest.

With gusts of jet blast from the four engines, this stick-framed contraption rose into the sky and jumped about in an uncontrolled fashion. "Who taught you how to fly these things?" Jade yelled over the sound of the engines.

"No one, really," responded Deme, as he fought the controls.

"Well, that's obvious. Here, let me do it." Jade took the controls, and the small flyer leveled off and began to fly straight.

"Fine, be that way. I thought my method was much more interesting," Deme joked.

"Your way was going to get us killed," retorted Jade with a smile.

The two men rose high into the morning sky and, with instruments recording and scanning, they hoped to find an answer. A second and third flyer also rose, quickly following Deme and Jade. Deme shouted orders over the transmitter to the other two flyers, telling them to move to different quadrants of the sky.

Suddenly the resonating stopped. Dismayed, the three flyers returned to the city. A meeting was quickly called in the town hall. Everyone was disturbed, fearful, and full of questions. "Do we know anything about what's happening?" someone shouted.

Calmly, Deme rose. "We do know a few things now. The reason I had a flyer at my house was because I suspected we might hear this strange noise again. I've confirmed that today's sound was the same as we heard yesterday, but just a few moments later. This suggests a time dilation to the sound."

Someone tried to interrupt and was quickly hushed. "This time dilation might be natural or artificial, and I suspect that later today we will again be subjected to that same sound," Deme said. "I've also deduced one other fact." Everyone was quiet now. "The second session of sound

was a few seconds shorter than the previous one."

"So, you're saying that over time, the events will stop because the time is decreasing?" Jade asked.

"Yes, but I'm not sure that's a good thing, because the vibrations are increasing as the time is decreasing," Deme replied.

"Are we being attacked?"

"Is this natural for the planet?"

"Can we stop this from happening?"

All the questions came at once, and there simply weren't any answers. That afternoon, and the next day, and the day after that, and for the following five days, the noise returned and intensified.

Each time, the duration shortened and the vibrations increased. On the eighth day, the sound did not return. The people held their breath and waited in fear, but nothing happened. Two weeks passed and the fear subsided. The sounds were still being studied and analyzed when a new event hit.

The boom was so fierce and deafening that several people blacked out. Shock waves smashed several buildings to the ground. Terrified, people began to discuss whether they should try to restart the original Earth ship, the USS Rothschild, which had brought the first military colonists. But the ship had remained dormant for far too long and had no power supply. This realization only fueled the fear. The shocking boom returned every day at the same time and increased in intensity, with the additional plague of thinning the air and making it difficult for people to breathe.

Panic was now the norm. It was decided that the only safe recourse was to hide in the surrounding hills, deep inside caves. Ear-shattering and chest-shocking blasts hit the planet daily for a month, then stopped. When the survivors emerged from their caves, the planet was in ruins. No structure anywhere was still standing.

"Well, smart guy, what do we do now?" Jade asked his friend Deme.

"I know we're being attacked!"

"Ah, shit, I was hoping it wasn't that," Jade said sadly. "Any ideas?"

"Just one. We find a place on this rock that has a body of water large enough for us all to hide under," Deme replied, packing up his belongings, like all the other survivors now leaving their caves.

"Well, that's going to be a bit tough. This rock has mostly rivers, and there aren't that many bodies of water to start with!" Jade said.

Jade was correct. Crest was a small world and there were only two significant bodies of water on the planet, just large, shallow lakes possibly seven meters at their deepest points. At the residents' meeting, Deme spoke of everything he had surmised, and a plan was hatched to save the still rattled and shaking survivors. They would dam some rivers, dredge up the bottom of a nearby lake, and use a large section of the original space craft as a safe harbor under water.

What Deme feared might come next was nothing less than total destruction of the surface of the planet. The first attack had been on the senses, an attack to demoralize and unnerve the populace, with the intention of creating panic. The second attack was designed to destroy infrastructure and destabilize the community. The third attack would be to occupy an already defeated planet and kill the inhabitants with the least possible casualties to the attacking force.

That was how Deme described the situation to the meeting. The original military equipment and technology, though primitive, was working and in good condition. Thus, within a few days,

the lake was dredged enough to submerge a large section of the USS Rothschild. Damming the rivers was an easy task. The use of high explosives placed in mountain passes forced water to be diverted to the lake. When all was finished, the section submerged was covered over with enough debris to look natural, and a tunnel to the surface doubled as a ventilation port for fresh air. Military equipment was hidden in a cave and the entrance disguised with rocks, earth, and shrubs.

Without waiting for further disasters, the people of Crest moved their possessions into the survival shelter beneath the lake and sensors were placed in camouflage all around the shore to detect any movement. A periscope would be used to observe intruders. To the casual observer, the planet looked destroyed and unoccupied or, at least, this was the hope.

The third attack hit with no warning. Great sections of the surface were subjected to intensive bombardment from orbit. Deme had guessed that the attackers would value water as a resource and refrain from contaminating it. His guess was correct. But any structure that did not appear to be part of the planet's eco-system was completely obliterated.

It was well into evening before the oppressors from orbit made themselves visible. Jade, who was doing his shift at the periscope, was shocked. They looked like children, being not more than three feet tall and ridiculously thin. Jade woke the others and described what he'd seen.

Deme quickly activated a monitor so the survivors could see for themselves.

The people of Crest didn't know that these 'children' were the Grays. Loki had left Earth after the end of the Mahoud-Earth War and arrived on Crest at about the same time as the Grays destroyed Earth in the Night of the Black Rain. Because the survivors on Crest had no contact with Earth, they had no way of knowing that the Grays existed. The Loki had the combined technology of Mahoud, the humans and the Taskers, but would have been no match for the Grays, anyway. The military technology of the original expedition to Crest was so primitive that it was utterly useless.

Deme had decided that hiding was the most logical course, and he planned for it very well. The Grays were nothing if not persistent; they checked and rechecked every possible hiding spot, leaving little unexplored. They never once, however, considered looking underwater. Those hiding in the derelict remains of the spacecraft had supplies for several days, which was lucky, for the Grays remained and searched until just about the last cracker had been consumed.

Deme and the others were very hungry by the time they felt safe enough to return to the land, after a scouting party had confirmed that the Grays were indeed gone.

"I think we have our answer now," Jade said to Deme.

"What do you mean?" Deme asked.

"I think we now know why the first colony on planet Crest is missing completely. My guess is that these aliens took them, then returned to make sure the job was done."

"That's a bit of a stretch, but I guess it makes sense," Deme said, scratching his head. "We seem to have only two choices. Either we leave this planet, or we prepare to live and hide here."

Jade looked about at the devastation. "What would you have us do? Dig tunnels?"

"That's not such a crazy thought. The military's digging equipment is still in good working order. It really might not take that long to expand what we've already started." Deme fell silent, already planning and scheming all the facets of life underground.

"Fine. When you have this all worked out, we'll suggest the idea to the others, but I doubt anyone will agree!" Jade was convinced that this was not a good idea.

Deme worked out all the angles in a few days and presented two options to his people. It was obvious to all that leaving the planet was impossible because they had no ship. Therefore,

staying and digging-in was the only solution.

And, as the construction began and the results became apparent, it was also obvious that living underground was far superior to anything the surface offered. The complex they built and continued to build over many generations was magnificent, and so complex that life on the surface soon became almost a legend.



#### **DART SPEAKS TO READER:**

Now you want to know what Charger R/T did after he realized he could blink anywhere he wanted?

He stayed on Crest for many years. He'd arrived right after the first colonists lost to the Grays and got his revenge against Abarth for the atrocities that monster had committed. He decided the empty solitude of the planet would ease his troubled mind.

What atrocities? I'll tell you that part of the story very soon. You did ask me to tell you about Reanna and my early life, and I want to get that out of the way first.

The years went by, and Charger R/T was there, watching, as the second group of colonists hid from the invading Grays. He did nothing, certain that non-involvement was best.

"Let them figure it out themselves for a change," he said to himself. He sometimes thought of visiting his older self, aware that Charger was on some distant planet. But why?

He knew that at any time he could alter the future, change a few things, take a few more lives and stop the madness that was going on in the rest of the universe. But he did not move. He really liked this group of humans. Though he had the powers of a god, this despised killer created by humanity now just sat and listened to the stillness of time.

Well, that may not sound very exciting to someone as young as you, Reader, but by that time, Charger R/T probably felt that he had experienced enough excitement in his life.

You still think he's a hero? I have mixed feelings about that.

Yes, my mother was lost in space the second time for fourteen hundred years. You think it's sad that she slept her whole life away? So do I, but that was what space travel was like back then.

But consider it a bit more, Reader. Many humans in the past spent their whole lives half-asleep. And today, humans do exactly the same thing, even though they're living thousands of years and may live forever. They see and hear nothing but what they want to see and hear, and thus have no clue about the possibilities and wonders of life.

Oh, you want to know why I say Charger R/T has the powers of a god? First, I'll remind you that knowledge is power.

Let me put it in scientific terms. Humans understand nanotechnology. The black spheres and the Grays understand picotechnology, which is a thousand times more complex. Charger R/T understands femtotechnology, which is a million times more complex than nanotechnology. As he sometimes says, he's good at math. But he's also not human; he's a construct. Knowledge like that would probably make my head explode, but it's no problem for him.

Here's a practical example, Reader. Imagine that everything I've said to you in the last few weeks is printed in a book and that we're now on page 656. Those pages are made up of characters; letters, numbers, spaces, and punctuation, and all those characters add up to 1,173,535. That's right, one million, one hundred seventy-three thousand, five hundred and thirty-eight.

Yes, I'm pretty good at math myself! Well, you know where I got *that* from.

Now, if you understood femtotechnology, you would remember every single one of those characters, in the correct order, and you'd be able to repeat it them exactly. But even that would be nothing for Charger R/T. Think about the pages, or the black ink that gives the characters shape. Think about the number of atoms in each printed character and the way the atoms fit together. He'd be able to remember all the atoms, too. Just as he also understands the elements of the universe and how they work, all the information we dream of but don't have.

You're afraid that your head will explode?

I promise it won't. But I'll stop now.

## Chapter 7 Birth of Dart

"I calculate this woman's age as between 170 and 175 years old," Dr. Dean Smyth said to the computer cameras. On the other end of the communication network was a team of doctors, all versed in advanced genetics.

Miners working on an asteroid near New Eden had chanced upon the Earth ship Loki adrift in space. When they retrieved the craft, they found a life form inside. Treating the ship as of historical importance, the planet's scientists took possession of the craft and the one lone occupant, Reanna.

"Her telomeres show the degradation of someone about forty, but the ship's records confirm her age as 174," Dean continued, as the examination of the still dormant Reanna continued in the medical facilities.

There had been nearly eleven hundred years of progress on New Eden since the time of Tegra-Duran's presidency and the fight against the black sphere. Great cities dotted the surface of the planet and people were prosperous.

And it had been seventy-five years since the time-lock was found and the trapped occupants released. Charger R/T was free to roam about the planet unescorted, for it seemed that he represented little danger, since he believed what Abarth had told him of humanity's great advancements and peacefulness.

The black sphere was not content. It was bent on trying to persuade the people of New Eden to follow its commands and seemed to have great difficulty with not being respected anymore.

Dr. Smyth continued. "Apparently the technology of Earth, at the time the Loki was launched, had the unexpected effect of preventing the body from aging. What we have here is an individual nearly two hundred years of age, but physically in her late forties or early fifties." Dean had probed the genetic structures in ever greater detail. Humanity, in these days, could live at least six hundred years. Possibly more.

With resolution capabilities to the level of quarks, the science used on New Eden at this point in human evolution bordered on magic. Though the antiquated term 'computer' was still used, the machines of this time were so radically advanced as to be sentient. "The problem I see here is that our own evolution is of no value to this woman. We are as genetically diverse from her as she is from rabbits," Dean stated.

From the floating three-dimensional monitors in the medical room came a question. "So, if we revive her, she will quickly degrade and die?"

"Yes, that would be a logical conclusion," Dean replied as he closely scrutinized the DNA on a screen.

"Then it is decided. We must terminate this woman to prevent her suffering," the voice on the monitor said.

"That might not be necessary just yet. I do have an idea, though it is a bit radical," Dean offered as he turned his attention from his patient to the medical monitors.

"Continue," came a responding voice.

"We can offer little to this woman genetically, but the being referred to as Charger R/T is genetically close. His molecular biology could stem the rapid aging this woman would face. This would also give science a firsthand look into our history. However, asking Charger R/T for genetic material might be dangerous." Dean flashed onto the monitors the processes needed for the observers to examine.

"We will need time to consider and get council approval for this. Leave the woman in stasis for now and we will render a decision shortly," came the reply.

The largest problem, Dean thought, was how to get Charger R/T to willingly offer up his genetic material. He had proved himself to be a most uncooperative beast, as had been shown through his interaction with Abarth years earlier.

Several months passed before the bureaucracy gave its blessing for Dean to try his approach. Dean himself traveled to where the beast had last been reported seen and found Charger R/T residing in a most unusual environment.

The beast sat seemingly dormant in a great field of blooming red poppies ringed on all sides by a mighty forest of pines. So long had Charger R/T remained in this position that flowers and tall grasses had grown high enough to partially hide him from view. All around him, at the edge of the forest, sat groups of humans led in songs and prayers by Pennington. They lived in clusters of make-shift tents that looked like hobo villages. Their gift of longevity meant they had no need for city facilities. They gathered only to worship.

Pennington had survived the debacle she and her long-time friend Celeste created and, at first shunned by society for her part in the death of the Prime, she later regained her power of persuasion and gathered another congregation. The people who camped around the sleeping giant Charger R/T were her new followers.

Pennington, like all the other humans of her generation, had benefited from the genetic science of longevity. Slowly at first, such humans gained a hundred years of extra life span. Then, with that gift added to their age, humanity learned to add more years of life. With humans being blessed by such long life spans, one would expect reason and logic to flourish. But this was not so with humans who entered the longevity program when already adult. They were as primitive as their ancestors before them. Pennington had convinced these followers that Charger R/T was now the one true god, for he alone had defeated the false black sphere god that claimed dominion over humanity long ago.

Large shrines dotted the field all around Charger R/T, but at some distance from him, for Pennington had convinced the masses that she alone was permitted to approach the sleeping giant. Thus, when Dean arrived to ask for a sample of DNA from Charger R/T, he was met with resistance and hostility.

"Hello, my name is Dr. Smyth. I'm from UC Genetics Medical Labs, and have permission from the council to approach the creature known as Charger R/T," Dean politely said to Pennington.

Pennington, with a few of her followers, had blocked the doctor from getting any closer to their deity. They stood unmoved, in simple robes of cotton and silk, brightly colored and adorned with religious trinkets, looking for all intents and purposes like preening peacocks. "I do not recognize your council's authority," Pennington said, "and I see no reason to let you approach our revered being, blessings be upon thee."

"I don't wish to interfere with your beliefs or endeavors here, and I respect your right to have them. However, I require something from the Charger R/T to save the life of a young girl." Dean spoke politely, hoping to sway the people blocking his path. "It is really just a simple thing. I only need to touch this Charger R/T being with my instrument to gain a genetic sample, that's all." Perhaps explaining his needs would show his sincerity and respect to the group.

"You're a typical scientist," Pennington spat, her distaste palpable. "You butcher humanity, strip away our grace and tread upon our holy ground as if you owned the planet!" Pennington was beginning to work herself into a frenzy. Any opportunity to preach from a pulpit was

something she relished, and her flock willingly endorsed this.

Dean tried to explain. "Please, I mean no ill will here, but I need a sample from Charger R/T to save the life of an innocent girl."

"And how many innocent girls has your science killed? You and your ilk always make grandiose claims of doing good, but the truth is that your irresponsible behaviors have doomed the peoples of this world!" Pen snapped.

Pennington was not a bad person, but she had come to identify very strongly with her great grandmother, the innocent little girl who once met a real Gray and befriended it. She was deeply committed to her beliefs, but unwilling to admit that she herself had benefited from the science of longevity.

"Using the word science in such a broad sense is irresponsible," Dean said as his frustration grew. "Science has done more to save this world than destroy it!"

"Save this world?" Pen stammered, as her shrill voice became louder. "You have doomed us all; you have brought us to the precipice of the end times! Because of the likes of you, I have to be the one true force that guides these people toward salvation!"

There it was, presented for all to hear. The rallying cry of the apocalyptic insane, the worshiper of chaos, the grandiose claim that if only everyone followed her, she would save the world. Dean was angry and frustrated, and fell into the trap of fighting her with logic, forgetting that facts meant nothing to true believers.

"How dare you!" Dean roared. "In recorded history, people like you have prayed for the destruction of our only means of survival. Your type has always made efforts to kill as many followers as is possible. Remember David Koresh, Heaven's Gate, Jim Jones and the poisoned Kool-Aid! Your claims of peace are all false. In your crusades and jihads, you're intent on dragging as many souls down with you as you can, and this is amply recorded in history. It's as if you are afraid to die alone. If you have to die, must all of humanity die with you?"

Dean was now in full fight mode. Desperate to gain access to Charger R/T, he started pushing members of the congregation out of his path. More and more members rushed to Pennington's aid, heeding the rallying cries of a woman determined to win a pointless argument simply to save face.

Pen once more launched into sermon mode. "We, the descendants of old Earth, have recaptured all our lost history from the Taskers. Our savior, the Charger, descendant of the first savior, the Christ, has taught us that strength, understanding, compassion, and logic are not enough to ensure our salvation. The Charger, like the Christ in the time of old, taught us that sometimes it is necessary to sell your belongings and buy a weapon in order to survive. He taught us that violence is often the means toward true peace. That his blessed resurrection was divine can never be disputed, and his sacrifice for humanity can never be repaid. His return to our time stream was foretold."

In all the pushing and shoving, no one noticed that Charger R/T had stirred from his slumber. He now stood close to Pen and Dean, towering large above their heads.

Pennington, arms flailing about in the air, and shouting more scripture in hopes of winning this verbal joust, suddenly realized Charger R/T's presence. She fell to her knees and began praying and worshiping her god.

Dean was shocked at Charger R/T's size and brutal features. He truly appeared demonic. Dean stumbled backward, trying to distance himself from this beast. Everyone stopped and stood in silence, except for Pen, who continued to shout prayers.

Annoyed by the racket, Charger R/T flicked his wrist and sent a wave of force that thudded

hard into Pennington's chest. The impact lifted Pen off her feet, throwing her like a rag doll across the field almost to the trees. The faithful began to panic. Stumbling over themselves, hurrying to escape, they abandoned anyone unfortunate enough to fall down.

Charger R/T took one great step, intending to pass Dean and walk away, but Dean was quick. As Charger R/T passed him, he reached out and touched the beast with the instrument. Charger R/T stopped and turned his full gaze on the fear in Dean's eyes. Reaching out, he lifted Dean from the ground by his throat. Dean was gasping for air as Charger R/T twisted the man back and forth in his hand, apparently trying to peer inside Dean's mind. Dean was helpless. As he clung to his instrument, hoping to survive, he saw in the reflection of those milky white eyes his imminent demise.

But Charger R/T found no threat. He released Dean, who crashed to the ground, landing in a crumpled heap. As quickly as Charger R/T had risen, he disappeared, leaving the people dazed and confused. Pennington was picking herself up from where she had landed, begging forgiveness from her god and blaming herself for the outcome. Dean felt that he had pressed his luck far enough and retreated, hurrying to return to the genetics lab. He had a more than adequate sample.

The assembled medical team began replicating and increasing the stolen tissue, preparing a sample to introduce to the woman still held hostage in a stasis chamber. Dean described the process and techniques used by the medical team members working on Reanna and this was shown on computer monitors for councilors who watched. After some time, the woman seemed to respond positively. The team hit a few stumbling blocks along the way but, ever determined, they increased the amount of the genetic sample from Charger R/T and tried again.

After several hours, Dean concluded that nothing further could be done, and it was now up to his patient to either survive or die. Three days passed before Reanna opened her eyes. A crowd of unfamiliar faces stared back at her.

Reanna managed to ask a single question, "Where am I?" then slipped back into unconsciousness. Now things went downhill for her. After several days, Dean finally had to admit that Reanna was in a deep coma. He decided it was best to let her remain dormant. After a month of pressure from the council to either allow this woman to die or revive her, Dean grudgingly agreed to let Reanna die.

However, just before the commencement of the procedure to humanely end Reanna's life, a second heartbeat was detected. The medical staff were shocked. What had happened was unclear, but Reanna, a virgin, had become pregnant. This was truly alarming, because the laws now permitted only genetically controlled and engineered births to create new humans.

The common story of unwanted births had long since passed into history; the longevity program saw to that. As well, all children born were subject to rigorous controls to prevent diseases and defects from undermining the populace.

Dean prevailed on the council to let Reanna live until the baby was full-term. The child appeared to be in perfect health, but his mother was still in a coma and Dean once again acceded to the council's decision to allow her to die.

That Reanna was a virgin mother had not gone unnoticed by Pennington and her followers, however. The fact that the medical doctors were preparing to allow the birth of a natural child into society was greeted by this group as miraculous.

"Science be damned!" Pennington shouted from the pulpit of her small field church, where Charger R/T once resided. "This blessed birth of a child from our god, Charger R/T, cannot be disputed, and to a virgin, no less!" The followers of Pennington, or Pope Paul, since she had

retaken that name, cheered wildly.

"I told you, my beloved faithful, that we would receive a sign! This is the true son of god, born to our world and not to an alien race. We are the chosen people!" The fanatical followers packed up their belongings and began camping out in the medical lab's facilities, praying and praising their god for the deliverance of a son.

Violence and killing had also long since vanished because of the genetics program, for it had become nearly impossible to kill a fellow human being. This meant that the police force no longer existed, since there was no need for them. Thus, the medical facility was left to defend itself from the encroaching fanatics. After Pennington's first encounter with Dean and the medical staffers, she decided to recall her most devoted follower from missionary service.

Cardinal Abarth knelt before his Pope and kissed her ring, then rose to his feet and asked, "How can I serve the church?" Pennington commanded her followers to leave her presence, for she wanted privacy with Abarth. Pen explained at some length the mission she wanted Abarth to take. She wanted the child.

Abarth felt a moment of joy at this command from his pope, for he had long wanted some way to get back at Charger R/T. Abarth still felt slighted at what had happened when they first met. He had asked Charger R/T to kill him, but the demon refused. Capturing the demon's son might force him to assist with Abarth's twisted plans for revenge against humanity.



"So, what are the plans for this genetic throwback?" the nurse asked Dr. Smyth as she tidied up the room where the infant lay sleeping.

"I really wish the staff would stop referring to this child as a genetic throwback; it makes him sound like a Neanderthal," Dean snapped, losing patience.

"Well, it might help if you gave him a name instead of a number. Genetic throwback is easier to say than 195KG-87BL2," the nurse replied with a smile.

"Dart!" Dean blurted.

"What?" the nurse asked.

"Dart!" Dean repeated.

"Dart what? I don't understand?" the nurse replied, looking confused.

"Call him Dart," Dean said, as he looked at the boy's chart.

"That's an unusual name. Why Dart?" The nurse had become fond of the baby and was truly interested in his welfare.

"I had already thought of giving him a name, and I cut up pieces of paper with names on them and taped them to the wall in my office. I was using a dart to try to hit a name and kept missing, so I think it's easier to just call him 'Dart' and scrap any further attempts." Dean looked a little sheepish, embarrassed about his assault on the hospital's wall.

"Dart' seems fine." The nurse looked unimpressed with the good doctor's ability to choose a proper name.

The responsibility for Dart fell to Dr. Smyth. He wasn't quite sure what to do with it since he had decided never to marry and was living the life of a bachelor.

"It is, after all, your experiment, and we feel that the boy is better off in a home rather than in foster care," the councilor said to Dean over the communications line. "Besides, we here at the ministry have more pressing matters to deal with. There are entire towns and cities in need of repair and, what with the general craziness of people, we have our hands full."

"But..." Dean started to protest, for he had no idea how to be a father. Before he could express this concern, the councilor's voice interrupted.

"We feel that your work to date has been exemplary, and would hate to have to downgrade your pay and status in the medical community. And it's unthinkable that such a brilliant mind could be sent to some off-world colony where life is harsh and unkind. Don't you agree?"

Dean ignored the implied threats. He agreed to the terms the council proposed because he genuinely felt responsible for the baby. It was, after all, his work on Reanna that had led to this birth. Dean could not understand the mysterious process which had resulted in Reanna conceiving a child merely from being injected with genetic material from Charger R/T. The idea of a virgin getting pregnant was just nonsense, anyway. There had to be a medical explanation, and he was determined to find it.

Thus, Dart spent his formative years living safely under the compassionate care of Dr. Smyth. The only bad thing that happened was a weekly extraction of genetic material drawn from the boy so that Dean could continue his research into Reanna's case. But that was not painful, merely inconvenient.

Dart didn't find growing up particularly difficult. He was a bright and inquisitive child and loved to laugh. He did, however, have to deal with the fact that he was an oddity in school. He was not genetically smart or strong, he was not good looking or athletic, and he was, at best, below average in comparison to the others. The children he saw in class every day all grew at the same pace as he did, but Dean made it very clear that a day would come when Dart would see his friends stay young while he grew old.

Dart was twelve and quite naive when he had his first encounter with Abarth. It happened just outside of school and, had it not been for a few kids who took pity on Dart, his life would have turned out very differently.

Pennington had tasked Abarth with retrieving Charger R/T's son. They wanted to guide and control his development, to what end was never made clear. Just after classes, when Dart was walking across the school yard, Abarth approached and said that he had come to take Dart to his father. Young Chelsie was quick to notice what was going on and called for her friends to tell a teacher.

Dart had never realized that Chelsie liked him. She was extremely pretty and very smart. Dart didn't think that such a girl could ever be interested in him, so when Chelsie came to his rescue, he was perplexed.

Chelsie was from a rich family and, at age twelve herself, well-equipped with all the current technology for communication and protection. "I called Dart's dad and asked if you were to retrieve Dart for him!" Chelsie called out as Abarth had Dart by the arm and was leading him across the field. "He says he doesn't know you and is calling the school authorities!" she added. Abarth thought it best to retreat and, seeing a few teachers now approaching, quickly made himself scarce.

"You shouldn't just trust people, you know," Chelsie scolded Dart, as she led him back to the school to wait for his dad, who was now on his way. "Just because we live in a safe city does not mean that you're safe. That's what my dad always says," Chelsie continued, not noticing that Dart was stunned with the attention he was getting, nodding foolishly and grinning. "If it hadn't been for me, I think that guy might have hacked you to bits!"

Chelsie continued to lecture Dart, but he didn't take offence. Dart was, for the first time in his life, in love. Chelsie was tall and her hair was cut short and sporty, she wore artfully applied makeup like a grown woman, not painted on thick like a child. Dart was so engrossed in what

Chelsie was saying that he paid little attention to the questions the teachers were asking.

Chelsie noticed and smiled happily at the rapt attention Dart was giving her. Bravely, she took Dart's hand and said, "I think it best if I wait with you till your dad arrives. I don't want you to wander off and get kidnapped." When Chelsie spoke, she usually added a little giggle, which Dart found very attractive.

Dr. Smyth arrived in a panic, fearful for the child he had chosen to raise and care for. He whisked Dart off in the transport before he could be introduced to Chelsie, causing Dart to complain bitterly all the way home. Dean repeatedly apologized to the heart-broken Dart and promised to find and thank Chelsie as soon as he could. But Dean had a larger problem to deal with.

There had been many changes in humanity when the longevity program became a success and, at first, some were almost not even recognized. Humans with longer life spans found that death had been almost defeated. It took quite an effort to kill someone. There was no longer a need for a police force, or for armies. No one ever got sick, so most hospitals had shut down. The effect of long life snowballed through society. Increased prosperity meant that working became, for many, merely something to occupy one or two days a week.

Dean felt there was no way to protect Dart, now that there were no longer any child services. Dart was a natural human child, unaltered and all too mortal. Dean had to deal daily with Pennington's fanatics camped out at the research facility, and was now painfully aware that they had tried to abduct the boy. He had thought of moving from city to city to stay out of potential trouble, but his research was too important. This brazen attack made him reconsider his decisions.

Pennington and her agents wanted the boy because he was just that, a normal, human boy, the first natural human birth in quite some time. Even though Dart was technically birthed from a deceased mother, he had not been genetically created, which made him special. Dean decided, after much thought, that he would approach the council and request that Dart be given the rights of the longevity program, for this would ensure the boy's survival. It would make Dart nearly immortal, like other humans, and this might dissuade the church from pursuing him.

Getting these rights for Dart was not as easy as it sounded, for the laws and council had decreed, just after Dart's delivery, that genetic alteration before birth was acceptable, but must be denied to the living. Dean would have to fight the courts for the right to let Dart have what everyone on Earth already enjoyed. Not until many years later did Dart win the right to become a full member of the human race.

As Dart grew up and was forced to switch schools again and again to maintain his safety, he never forgot Chelsie. So, the day he heard from her again came as quite a surprise. It was only a week after graduation when Dart received a message on the network. Chelsie had tracked him down and was inviting him to a small café for coffee. He found the offer impossible to refuse. The look on Dart's face said it all as he met the most radiant woman he had ever seen. Chelsie had grown into a beautiful woman, well-educated and kind. "I just can't get over it. It's been ten years since I last saw you," Dart said as he tripped over his tongue, trying his best to sound intelligent. "You look incredible."

"Thank you, that's so kind of you to say," Chelsie replied as she sipped on her coffee and snacked on a small dry biscuit. She always felt uncomfortable acknowledging her appearance but found it easy to forgive Dart. He was still the same awkward kid she remembered. Dart never had any difficulty in placing both feet in his mouth.

"I have decided to remain this age for the next few years, just to see if I like the results,"

Chelsie said, as she flipped her hair away from her large blue eyes. Looking across the table at Dart, she asked, "What about you? What age will you choose?" A benefit of the longevity program was the ability to remain static in age, and one could remain a certain age for as long as one wished.

"I'm afraid I won't get a choice," Dart replied. He was mesmerized by Chelsie's beautiful face. "My father and I are having some success at convincing the courts to grant me the right to be genetically altered, but the process is slow, and we have recently learned that some of the court members might be affiliated with that church."

"Church? What church?" Chelsie asked.

"Well, you remember that guy that tried to kidnap me? He belongs to this fringe group that calls themselves a church, and they want me for some reason. My father has tried to explain it, but I still don't fully understand the reasons." Dart looked rather sheepish since he was embarrassed by the whole ordeal. "But, when I do get the longevity program approval, I guess I will be like you, able to pick an age. I think I will pick fifty. Guys always seem to look their best at fifty."

The afternoon flew past in conversation before the two parted and went their own ways. They dated several more times before Dart finally became brave enough to admit to Chelsie that he liked her a lot. Chelsie was more cautious. She said she didn't want to be in a relationship with someone who might not be right for her. She rejected Dart's affections for quite some time, but his persistence eventually won her over and they started dating more often. They eventually married and Dart's father, Dean, was very proud of his adopted son and his new daughter-in-law.

Dart had no way of knowing that Chelsie was a member of Pennington's church and that her affections were manufactured.

It was in the second year of their marriage that Chelsie started to question whether or not she could continue to participate in the charade. Her congregation was not pleased with Dart's unwillingness to attend church even though several invitations were extended. Chelsie was increasingly pressured to force Dart to attend. Otherwise, the congregation's plans to coerce to their service the son of their god, Charger R/T, would fail.

Dart was not a religious man and he had little use for friends, for few had ever accepted him. He held no opinion on religion and made no effort to learn. He was content to let others believe as they wished while he simply chose not to participate. On the few occasions that Chelsie made a fuss about Dart's unwillingness to do things her way, Dart simply smiled and escorted her to the door of the church but no further.

Slowly developing the strength of character to do the right thing, Chelsie began to question the church. She was uncomfortable with being asked to prostitute herself for the benefit of a few leaders bent on developing a political agenda for the church.

The couple were in the habit of having a quick coffee and snack at the café where they first dated, but this Tuesday morning would be different. "Dear, I have something to tell you. I'm hoping you will understand and not be too angry," Chelsie said, as she lowered her head in shame.

Dart replied to his beautiful wife, "I doubt there is anything you could ever do to upset me. I'm the luckiest guy in the world."

"I have been deceiving you..."

Dart started to object but Chelsie held up her hand and said, "Please let me finish. Years before I found you again, my family joined the church, the same church that Abarth attended. He's the man that tried to kidnap you. I'm not sure how it happened, but we came to worship you.

To us, you are the son of a god. In thousands of years, you are the first divine being born of a virgin impregnated by a god. This is of incredible importance to the church."

Dart tried to interrupt, but Chelsie, now sobbing, continued. "I was told to get to you. I'm a whore for the church!" She broke down and cried, her small delicate frame shaking and shivering.

Dart again tried to speak, but now Chelsie had a case of verbal diarrhea. "I'll understand if you hate me, I'll understand if you can never forgive me, but please, I want to be with you, please, give me a chance. I have told the members of the church and my family that I won't continue to help them. They are wrong to try and capture you. I won't let them." Chelsie wept uncontrollably, while other people at the café were now silent, engrossed in watching her. Dart tried several more times to interject, and was thwarted at every turn by Chelsie's guilt and shame as she rambled on.

Finally, desperate to gain a foothold in the conversation, Dart slid the coffee cup close to the edge of the small table until it tipped and crashed on the floor. The shock of the cup shattering interrupted Chelsie's rant, and Dart had his moment to speak.

"I know. I've always known. My father and I long suspected this to be true but look at me. I'm in a body aging with time. Soon I will be old, and you will continue to be young. We made mistakes, but I've always known that you love me." Dart reached out and took Chelsie's shaking hand. "Nothing you did wronged me in any way. And the knowledge that you are now defending me from your own parents speaks volumes. I always will love you, and I don't ever want to lose you." Dart ended the conversation with a smile.

Several women nearby scowled at their husbands, as much as to say, 'Why aren't you like this guy?' Most of the men just looked embarrassed.

Dart knew that their life from that day forward would be a struggle, but he felt that life with Chelsie was worth it. So, when he came home from a walk one day and found Chelsie dead from an exotic, vicious toxin, one which no medical authority had ever seen before, he correctly assumed it was the church's doing. But it took many years to discover that Abarth had created the toxin for use in his attempt to seek revenge for being wronged.

Dart was devastated and spent several years in mourning, making no effort to continue the legal case he and his father still fought in court. But time eased his wounds, and, at a little more than one hundred years of age, Dart eventually won his court case. His father performed the services necessary to genetically modify his adopted son, giving Dart a very, very long time to suffer the loss of his beautiful wife.

## Chapter 8 Charger R/T destroys heaven

Despite his significant size, Charger R/T was only a barely visible dot as he floated motionless in the vacuum of space. His body felt cold and lifeless as he hung in the darkness alone and silent, and the only thoughts that occasionally stirred his mind were his hatred for humanity and visions of his past life when there had been the relentless need to fight. This drifting Charger Resurrected/Terminus thought, too, about the burden of being the weapon humanity always called on when they were desperate, just as they had called on his original incarnation. He was tired of being the humans' whipping boy, and thus content for the moment to float free where nobody could find him.

As he looked around the vastness of the universe, he felt a moment of sadness at being rejected by those he helped, but only for a fleeting moment. The emotions he'd once felt now barely existed in his logical, computer-like mind, and his hardened indifference had muted any human pangs of conscience.

"There is a place," a whisper in Charger R/T's mind repeated incessantly, as if determined to gain his attention. "A place you can go, a place of peace."

"Great, now I'm hearing voices," Charger R/T grumbled. There could be no voices except his here in this inky black void. It must be an errant memory from long ago.

Time meant nothing to him, and it might have been a day, or a year, or even a century before he reacted to the persistent whisper. Summoning all his concentration, he focused on the destination the whisper gave him and blinked.

For a moment, arrival at the terminus of the blink left Charger R/T disoriented and perplexed. Though his feet seemed to stand on firm ground, the ground itself was in motion. It felt as though everything around him was in motion, constantly expanding and folding in again. Substance was vague, ambiguous, and barely tactile. The best description he could think of was a hall of blurry mirrors, endlessly reflecting him in a myriad of places. Then, among the infinite images of himself, a face appeared. He could see a mouth, a nose, a forehead, but with no body attached.

"It is good that you have come," the face said, causing Charger R/T to bristle aggressively. "We have waited an eternity for someone like you."

Charger R/T's expression was not quite anger nor quite hostility, though there was a hint of both. His whole demeanor was that of a beast ready to pounce and devour the thing in his path. "What the fuck is this place and who the fuck are you?" he growled.

"Please, friend, be at peace, we mean you no harm," came the reply from the face.

"Like you have any chance of harming me!" Charger R/T responded, taking a step toward the face.

"I am Enoch, and you are in paradise."

"Like fuck! I know the Enoch and you are not one of them!" Charger R/T clenched his fists, preparing to fight. An intense burst of light erupted from his body, as he let his rage build, causing the space around him to warp and twist.

"Please! Please, allow me to explain. We need your help."

"Ah, shit! If you're the voice I heard in my head, you promised me peace. Now you want my help!" Charger R/T's rage increased, and it seemed as if a release of his supreme power would destroy everything in a massive explosion.

The face began to retreat, trying to find some safe distance, but that was pointless. "Please, I

beg of you..."

Begging was Charger R/T's weakness. He always found it difficult to kill a creature begging. He held his rage in check and said, "Talk fast."

"I... We are Enoch, and we know of your encounter with others of the First Ones. We are not of them. We are of humans."

There was a quiver in the voice belonging to the face, and Charger R/T began to realize that there was no threat here.

"We were lied to about this place, and we have been in this form for what must amount to thousands of years. We were promised that when we passed through the heavenly gates, we would be immortal. We were never told that existence in this dimension would be utterly pointless, and we beg of you, as a fellow human, to release us."

"See, you're not making much sense to me now, and that may end badly for you." Charger R/T's voice boomed like thunder.

"I once had a human name like you," the voice said hurriedly. "I was called Blix, like my father before me, and his father before him. My people built a mighty empire on Earth long before you were born, but our greatest achievement was building the three megalopolises. The first was a gift, a world entombed within our world. A time capsule, if you like, for future generations to behold. The second complex is where we held our vast knowledge and corporeal bodies. The third was the heavenly gateway, a vast unending machine that allowed us to ascend to this realm, to this higher dimension."

Charger R/T began to relax. "Well, that's fine, but I'm not from Earth. I've learned that I'm a copy of a man who existed long ago. I'm not even sure if I'm human."

"We know of this, and you are most certainly human." The voice spoke with resolution. "You are not merely human, you are beyond what humanity will achieve for a very long time to come, if ever. This is why we have need of who and what you are. We need you to destroy the heavenly gate."

There it was again, the need for Charger R/T to destroy. The thing about humanity that he hated most was the way it always made him the weapon. "Look, I am not interested in helping you or your Enoch. Just go do it yourself." Charger began looking about for a way out of this place he'd stumbled into.

"I think you misunderstand. It is true that we are of the Enoch, but we are not like the Enoch you met. They are the Enoch of light and energy, and they can take different forms and interact with objects. We are the Enoch of air or spirit. We have no substance. We are formless vapors. We have no bodies, no arms, no eyes; we can never hold those we love, and we can never walk on beautiful shores or watch a sunset. Our existence is a lie. We were given immortality but denied any means of enjoying it."

"Don't care!" Charger R/T snapped as he decided to disregard any further comments and find a way out of this dimension.

"Please, we only want an end to our suffering. Just destroy the gate and we will release you."

Charger R/T stopped moving, his rage rising again. The words 'we will release you' rolled like a tidal wave in his mind. "Don't tell me you're stupid enough to try holding me here!" His voice was calm, like the breathless hush just before a storm.

"It is true that we are trying to prevent your departure and we know that you will not stay for long. You can destroy us all here and now. But, if you don't also destroy the heavenly gate, you will be allowing others of our kind to someday be trapped here. We only try to hold you here in hopes of success in pleading our case. We seek your compassion." The voice trailed off.

Charger R/T almost laughed as he responded, "Compassion! From me?"

"Please, we have lived like this for thousands and thousands of years. There is nothing here except eternal time. Even if there were other things, we have no way of enjoying them. We can do nothing except exist, as in a void. We need you to end our existence, and we need you to prevent this from happening to others."

Charger R/T decided he was a fool to have listened. "Oh, I'm going to end your existence all right."



#### **DART SPEAKS TO READER:**

You want to know about dimensions?

Okay, let's start with the simplest, two dimensions. That's length and width, or back and forth, side to side, but no height, no depth. In a two-dimensional world, all objects, including humans, would be just flat shadows. If you were a little flat human living in a little flat house, you wouldn't be able to see Charger R/T if he stuck a finger or a foot into your house. All you'd see would be the shadow of his fingertip or the shadow of his boot where it hides the floor.

Yes, that's right, we live in a three-dimensional world, with length, width, and height, which means we can see Charger R/T's huge body. But he exists in the fifth dimension, which is beyond our ability to comprehend. Our eyes tell us we can see him, but what we see is only a representation of him and he may, in fact, be everywhere.

It was not known until the late twenty-first century that there were only five, not eleven, dimensions. Scientists discovered, of course, that the fifth dimension consists of the three dimensions all humans experience, plus time and space, coupled with an elevation to a higher plane of existence.

What would it be like to live there?

A being in the fifth dimension can observe and interact with a being in the third or fourth, but the reverse is impossible. An old theory proposed that the fifth dimension is like a parallel world, or a system of many worlds, with outcomes of events determining each world's existence. In fact, the fifth dimension is a quantifiable plane of existence where the observer experiences all the dimensions simultaneously, as if they are one. This is why Charger R/T felt the two-dimensionality of standing in front of a single mirror, yet viewed multiple mirrors reflecting him from every conceivable angle, warped by time and space.

You want to go see the fifth dimension for yourself? That's not possible yet, Reader. Yes, I know Charger R/T can do it, but the rest of us will have to wait until science finds a way for ordinary humans to get there.



Now Charger R/T understood the way out of this place. He sat down and contemplated his next move.

The voices were silent for some time before the one voice he recognized finally asked, "Will you help us?"

"I'm always killing something," Charger R/T said as he exhaled a great sigh from his massive frame. "Fine. What do I have to do?"

"Give us your word you will destroy us all and the heavenly gate, and we will tell you how

to leave this place."

"I already know how to leave this place," Charger R/T snapped. "What I want in exchange is all your knowledge. And that's not negotiable!"

"To what end could all our collective knowledge benefit you?" The voice queried in a perplexed tone.

"Let me worry about that," Charger R/T said, his tone harsh.

Not even the Prime Tasker, who had built Charger R/T's mind from all that Henry and Charger ever saw or did, knew that his creation had a voracious appetite for knowledge that matched his growing godlike physical powers. Charger R/T was thirsting, like the mythological vampire of old, for the memories of everyone he was going to kill. The essence of a person is the sum of all their memories and knowledge. This was the blood Charger R/T now demanded. He would swallow them all.

"Do we have a deal?" he asked joyfully, anticipating memories from thousands.

"Yes," the voice replied, not understanding what was being asked of them all.

Charger R/T eagerly accepted all the memories of every human who had entered this place, every child, every elder, every lover and hater. He raped the minds of every single being, sometimes laughing at the embarrassment he found. He held up the memories of these rotted souls to their faces, humiliating them. For a long moment, he stood reveling in his disgusting prize, in his knowledge of all the dirty secrets. Those who had claimed to be of a high moral caliber were now faced with their true selves.

Suddenly and savagely, Charger R/T slammed his great hands together, exuding a wave of violence and destruction outward in all directions, putting an end to every being who had once called this place paradise. With those hands cupped before his massive chest, he compacted the space around him in a fantastic effort of compression, squeezing the life essence out of this plane of existence. Then, releasing everything, he exploded out into space, and blinked far into the dark cold void.

It was done. Heaven had been cleansed and destroyed. Those who had been "saved," from every part of time, were dead, released into the peace of non-existence.

Charger R/T blinked to Earth, to the gates of a complex in Egypt, to the year 2050. He materialized abruptly to an astonished team of scientists that had just discovered the location of this prodigious machine, the gate to heaven. The team had spent most of the day exposing the massive stone entrance to the Egyptian complex built by the First Ones beneath the Sphinx and, as the heavy machinery being used was retracted, Charger R/T appeared.

The sphinx towered like a cliff over the entrance to the complex and, as the seven scientists tried to distance themselves from Charger R/T, sands from around the paws of the sphinx came sprinkling down.

"You should be running now!" Charger R/T said to the nearest scientist in a calm, rational manner, as if compliance meant nothing special to him.

Shocked and dismayed at this beast's sudden appearance, the members of the team felt discretion was called for and tried to retreat. They stood little chance of succeeding.

Again, Charger R/T used his great hands to compress the space around him, twisting gravity and matter into a ball of instability in front of his massive frame. Blinding light and extreme heat radiated from where he stood, searing and turning the sands all around instantly into glass. The air boiled as the scientists burst into flames, and the nearby excavating machines melted like butter in the sun. When the resulting explosion ended and the dust settled, all that remained was a crater thirty miles across. There was no sign of Charger R/T, or the Sphinx, or the pyramids.

The seven scientists had been in communication with the scientist, Andy Kent, in Dhuusamareeb, Somalia, as he spoke with his employee, Lucy, and a young research assistant. Andy stood staring at his communicator in disbelief, trying to make sense of what he had just heard. Lucy asked, "My god, what the hell just happened there?"

"I have no idea," Andy replied slowly. Andy, Lucy, and the young researcher stood in silence in the newly risen forest of the First Ones, and watched in disbelief as the replica of Stonehenge they had just discovered glowed blue for a moment, then dimmed and faded away.

The entire event had been recorded both by satellites and nearby seismic sensors. The link with the fifth dimension was shattered and, as the Enoch had desired, never rediscovered.

## Chapter 9 Betrayal of Pennington

Pennington, her old face twisted with rage and frustration, shouted at Abarth, "How dare you return to me yet again without the child? How hard can it be to bring this son of Charger R/T before your pope?" She shifted her weight in the regal chair, anger showing in every line of her body. Pointing her bony old index finger directly at Abarth, she shouted so loudly that most of the people in the church could hear her. "Damn it, Abarth, damn it all to hell! I give you the best technology, the best fighters, the best information and, for the third time, you come to me in failure! The child must be brought before me. Do you not understand the importance of my command?"

Abarth lowered his head and, face hidden from Pennington's sight, rolled his eyes, for he knew what she'd say next. He'd only heard it a thousand times before.

"The child of god must be made to recognize me. I am the leader of this church, and the child must serve me!" Pen pounded her fist on the arm of the chair. She'd always been a good person at heart, but devotion to her belief blinded her to what was really good or bad in the real world.

Abarth didn't care. He was tired of being belittled and his tone reflected this. "It has never been easy to find this child. As soon as we get close, he is relocated to a new city, with a new identity. Dr. Smyth and the people helping him are all fanatics, believers in science and medicine. They are an apocalyptic group of radicals bent on hoarding the child for themselves." Abarth shuffled his feet, pretending to be nervous.

"That's enough!" Pen exclaimed, rising. "I want this child! Do not fail me again, or it will be your last task!" Her words proved to be a bad mistake.

As Abarth left the pope's chamber, he decided that Pen had crossed the line. This time she had gone too far. This time he would kill her and take the church leadership, for he now had the backing of several others who were also sick of Pennington's rants. The problem he faced was how to kill a near immortal and do it in a way that cast suspicion on someone else.

Abarth had become a master of deception, convincing everyone that he was a good and decent man. From the pulpit, he often told members of the congregation of the deaths of his wife and three daughters, and how the duplicity of medical science was to blame.

The truth was that he and his family had eagerly volunteered for the longevity program in its early days. He knew the risks but his greed for life was insatiable. The lure of immortality was too great, and the risks were dismissed as merely science's need for extreme caution. Abarth believed, as he always had, that he knew best and ordered his family to do as he commanded. When the genetic alterations were rejected by the immune systems of his wife and children, and the horrors of a rapid aging and painful death were at hand, he could not accept responsibility for what he had done.

Abarth had gone to great lengths, through the legal system and news media, to smear and besmirch the entire program because of the deaths. Finally reaching the highest courts in the land, Abarth was stopped when it was proven beyond any reasonable doubt that Abarth, and Abarth alone, was fully responsible for forcing his family into the program against their will.

He sat for some time in the small, cramped quarters he kept at the pope's church, creating a plan that would result in the death of Pennington and his taking control of the church. When he was sure he had worked out all the angles, he committed himself to his atrocity.

The deed would be done on the eve of all hallows day, a religious holiday recaptured from

Earth's past, when the church was said to rule supreme. This holiday required members of the congregation to dress up in antiquated religious garb copied from data in the Taskoids' memory banks. It was also a time of cleansing and crusades. Devout church members would willingly be burned at the stake or tortured without fear of death, thanks to medical science and the longevity program. Brutal acts of violence would be committed upon members who believed that surviving such acts was a test of their faith.

Members also reveled in the violence and stupidity of immoral behavior that night, sacrificing burnt offerings of innocent animal flesh, mostly cats. When the peak of the evening's frenzy was reached, Pope Paul was to appear and give a speech praising the faithful and their commitment to punish science for the loss of their god.

But this time Pennington did not appear. The crowd waited in anticipation and a few members began to ask, "Where is the pope?" Then, in plain sight and with hundreds of witnesses, Abarth mounted the podium and cried, "Our pope is gone. She has been taken by filthy scientific fanatics!" The crowd was first shocked, then angered, as Abarth continued his deceit.

He went on inciting the crowd into an unreasoning mob of angry and violent psychopaths. As the night wore on, calls for revenge and anarchy came from many twisted and terrifying human minds. Yet, though the crowd screamed and shouted, they knew it would be useless to inflict physical harm on people, for everyone was close to immortality now. They needed some other method of wreaking revenge.

At no point that night did anyone ask how and where Pennington's remains were found, or even if there were remains. These people were so taken in by Abarth the deceiver that no questions or even individual thoughts arose. The crowd decided if they could not kill, they would burn and destroy people's homes and businesses in retaliation for a crime they had no proof even existed.

The mob of militant religious stormed, burnt, and looted in the city streets, but Abarth did not lead them. He returned to the church for a malicious reason. He wanted to show Pennington what he had accomplished.

What Abarth had done to Pennington was both demented and tragic. He and a few radicals he had converted sneaked into the pope's chambers, where they bound and gagged the woman. The church had an old service elevator that once operated to access the building's mechanical room but, with new technology, the room had become obsolete. The cramped room was filled with old, unused machinery. The elevator had long since been removed and the doors secured shut, sealing off the old space. That is, until Abarth learned of its existence through his work as a building engineer.

Abarth knew that he probably could not kill Pennington, but he could entomb her. He lowered her kicking and screaming body down the shaft to the floor of the mechanical room. Then, with the help of heavy equipment, he poured tons of wet concrete down the shaft. He hoped Pennington would spend eternity alive but sealed in a tomb of his hatred, a tomb of solid concrete. The whole deed was so well planned and executed that hardly an hour passed between the time she was last seen and the announcement of her disappearance.

Out of sheer spite, Abarth had sent Pope Paul to her tomb with a piece of the technology she hated so much. A pair of glasses had been fixed to her face which gave her a view, through variously located cameras, of the outside world. Images of her flock rampaging the streets in her name were repeatedly flashed to her via the cameras.

Abarth committed one final act of malice before he left, guaranteeing that Pen, if she was

truly immortal, would be in torment for eternity. He disconnected the pope from the technology which would have allowed her to blink.

Abarth caught up with the mob again and continued through the night working them into such a frenzy that they mindlessly went on burning and looting. His co-conspirators egged him on to continue these barbaric acts of cruelty and, with no police force to stop the mob, by morning much of the city lay in ruins.



#### **DART SPEAKS TO READER:**

Oh, haven't I explained the blink system to you? Sorry about that!

The first use of the blink had been a technological triumph when Tegra-Duran was still in power because it ended the need for external transportation methods. The system required a massive network of orbital satellites and millions of quantum computers. Billions of devices were manufactured, and one surgically installed in each human around the globe.

Each device was numbered and cataloged, then integrated into a global network of systems and subsystems which any individual could access virtually. This allowed the traveler to pick a destination and activate the transport, or the blink, which would remove him from his present location and reassemble him molecule by molecule at the desired destination. The best analogy I can think of is the twentieth century telephone system. One could call up the address where one wished to go, then be deconstructed and reconstituted all in a blink.

There are controls, of course, so that people can't blink themselves into the bottom of the ocean, or into a brick wall.

No, using the system doesn't hurt.

You wish to try it? Of course, but we don't have time for you to play with the system right now. It may be, though, that the blink is how you'll escape when we're attacked.

Yes, you are going to escape.

Am I not going to escape that way, too? I don't know, Reader. Charger R/T will save you, but there's no guarantee he'll save me.

You can see that for Abarth to disconnect Pennington from the system and deny her the ability to escape was purely vindictive. His professed religious belief was merely a mask covering his drive for power.



During the following days, Abarth went on public displays all around the world claiming the church he represented had been oppressed and that its right to religious freedom had been violated by the murder of Pennington. He demanded retribution and placed the blame squarely on the shoulders of Charger R/T, who was now being demonized as a false god. It didn't take much to convince the people that a beast such a Charger R/T could be responsible for this act, for he was known to be violent and unpredictable.

Abarth continued to condemn Charger R/T for being a servant of evil and demanded that citizens everywhere rise up, band together and put an end to this menace. But in order to slay the beast, first they had to find it. Charger R/T was never attached to the world blink system, so he had no 'phone number' to be used in establishing his location. However, the New Eden council continued to be bombarded by complaints from many citizens demanding the head of this

monster. Charger R/T had last been seen in the park where Pennington once camped as she built a religion to worship him. When it was confirmed that he was no longer there, a worldwide search began.

## X

In a tiny room, in a nondescript building located on the outskirts of the great city of Eur, looking out a dirty window at the green gardens she was never allowed to visit, sat Pennington and her shattered mind. She had been rescued from the concrete prison Abarth put her in, but not before her mind and spirit had failed. Pennington was now regarded by the medical profession as incurably insane. She was forced to wear special gloves to prevent her tearing flesh from her face and body or pulling handfuls of hair from her head.

The memory of heavy, rough concrete pressing on her living body when she was entombed had given Pennington a constant itching sensation that could never be relieved, no matter how much or how hard she scratched. The attendants force-fed her with medications and subjected her to regenerative therapy, but Pen seemed capable only of drooling and jabbering incoherently. The once mighty pope now looked like a desiccated, blackened scarecrow, wild-eyed and endlessly tormented inside her broken mind.

She was alone in her room when Charger R/T blinked into her presence. Pennington simply stared into those reflective white eyes and giggled insanely. Then, without warning, she flew into a rage, rose out of her chair, and bashed her head against the padded walls, trying desperately to end her life.

Charger R/T asked one question. "Where is the device you had?" It was more of a growl then normal language, but his point was clear.

The news media had been reporting on the appearance and disappearance of Charger R/T on the worlds that circled the sun. He was clearly searching for something, and Abarth watched with avid fascination. Inside Pennington's room, away from prying eyes, Charger R/T now faced a human who had once worshiped him and hated the way humanity treated him. He took pity on Pennington and, with a touch of his finger on her forehead, released her from her delusions.

For a little while, Pope Paul had clarity of mind. She asked, "Why did you do this for me?"

Charger R/T merely asked his question again. "Where is the device you had?"

Pennington looked at Charger R/T's massive presence filling almost all the room she was stored in, and asked, "Are you god?"

Charger R/T had no interest in what this woman thought or why she needed answers. Impatient, he spoke harshly. "The device. Where is it?" The growl he uttered would have driven most to quickly answer, but not Pennington.

She asked another question. "If I tell you, will you kill me?" It was a plea, a negotiation.

Charger R/T was again being asked to be a weapon. To get the information he needed, he had to strike a bargain. "The device! Where is it?" Charger reached down and grabbed Pennington by her robes, jerking her off her feet.

Pennington laughed insanely. She enjoyed being tormented now, believing in her ruined mind that torment would lead to death. She encouraged Charger R/T by torturing him. "I will never reveal the location of that scientific abomination. If you want it, you will obey me, Satan!" Pennington spat venomously into Charger R/T's face.

Charger R/T's free hand reached out and covered the whole of Pennington's head. He pressed his thumb against her skull. Before he forced his way through the bone and into her

brain, Pennington let out a mad laugh, reveling in Charger R/T's frustration.

"Kill me and you will never know! Kneel before me, Satan, and do my bidding!" Pennington reached beneath her gown and retrieved a cross made of gold and thrust it into Charger R/T's face. "Kneel, Satan. I command thee!"

Charger R/T realized he had little hope of creating fear in this woman. She was obviously in control of the situation. He carefully placed Pennington back on her feet and removed his thumb from her bleeding skull. From deep inside himself, he retrieved a power he rarely used.

When he killed the First Ones of air, they had agreed to give him the ability to see into the lives of individuals who were promised paradise, to know all their secrets so he could confront each and every one with their transgressions in life. Those First Ones of air, who had passed through the gates hidden under the Sphinx in Egypt, paid for their deaths by giving him the all the deeds and consequences of their lives. They were shown how arrogant, pitiful, and selfish their existence had been. Now Charger R/T would use this power on Pennington.

She began to remember the people she had betrayed for power, the people she ostracized for nothing more than their opinions, the existence she had squandered so uselessly on a wondrous planet. In spite of science gifting her the prospect of a full, rich life, safe and protected, with all the necessities of life, she had wasted precious time in belittling and oppressing others who need not have been hurt. Onto the movie screen of her mind flashed every face she had encountered in life, reflecting back at her the decisions and positions she had imposed on others. She was staggered.

This power of Charger R/T's was more than just the ability to clearly show people their guilt. It also showed the victims surviving the hatred of this pathetic woman. Pennington felt the weight of every vile and disrespectful action she had ever taken against another human being. It brought her to her knees.

From that place in the past where few humans go, Pennington's youthful childhood persona arose. The good and innocent child who had once listened in wonder to her great grandmother's stories about a small Gray alien from another world emerged and asked Charger R/T to please stop, she had seen enough. "Please forgive me," Pennington begged as she wept, finally understanding the folly of her life. Charger R/T relented and asked, "The device?"

Pennington was now bawling like a newborn and carried on for some time before she finally regained her composure. She explained that in the last camp where she had lived, in the deep cold of the northern regions of New Eden, the place where she tortured a living being for nothing more than revenge, she had buried the device. She had thought to use science to defeat science, and her unwillingness to accept her limited intelligence accomplished nothing except to kill innocent people.

Charger R/T turned his back on the sniffling pope but, before he blinked from the place, he raised his hand and ended her life. Close to immortal she might be, in the limited fashion of ordinary humans, but his god-like powers gave her a painless death and the air around felt less tainted.

The media caught sight of Charger R/T once again as he materialized in the cold, wind-swept plains of the northern region of New Eden. There, satellite cameras focused on his great mass as he stomped around the abandoned camp. Abarth had taken over the world ship and he watched from its command center as Charger R/T retrieved something from the ice, then disappeared in a blink. Abarth activated the alarm bells on board the ship in preparation for what surely would be Charger R/T's quick arrival to attack the ship. But he did not come.

Charger R/T had one more place to go before he attacked Abarth. Deep in space, a lone ship

sat cold and dormant. Free of any gravity pull from nearby planets, it floated aimlessly in the inky black void. It was a forgotten and derelict ship, devoid of life, or so it appeared. From its degraded structure, twisted metal, and the overall filthy condition, it was clear that it had served only one purpose. It was a Tasker mining ship from the early days of the Mahoud, a robotic spaceship sent out to mine precious minerals for the hollow black world. He had found it many hundreds of years before, when it was still mining for the Mahoud and had known, even then, that the ship and its crew would be useful to him. He now had the key to operate it.

Charger R/T knew that his defeat of Abarth was assured, so he didn't need an army. But he wanted one, and what better army could he have than something created by Gray technology many centuries in the past? Charger R/T's sense of irony always brought great joy to his heart, or what passed for one.

Why Charger R/T programmed one of the Taskers onboard to mount a black pirate flag high atop the vessel was anyone's guess, but it did hold a commanding and obvious position. Charger R/T took his time arming the Taskers.

Abarth, for his part, spent long hours wondering when and where the fight would start, and the uncertainty agitated him immensely. His demands became increasingly desperate and erratic as he paced the floor of his command center, constantly asking his devoted personnel if this noise was Charger R/T, or if that sound was Charger R/T.

Time passed slowly.

## Chapter 10 Abarth attacks Charger R/T

### DART SPEAKS TO READER:

I need to remind you of some long past history, Reader. It's relevant to what happens next, so please don't ask a lot of questions. Just listen.

You remember the Night of the Black Rain? Well, the day before the black rain encased Earth in molten metal, the Dinosauroids realized that the battle with the Grays had been lost. These industrious beings from prehistoric Earth had built a sizable civilization in their ancient homeland of Australia, and nearly all of them signed up to join humanity in their hour of greatest need. The Dinosauroid scientists had figured out the technology of the Grays through back engineering and were willing to share everything they had learned in a desperate bid to save their ancestral home.

With Earth nearing certain doom, the Dinosauroids initiated a final desperate act to strike back at the Grays. A single ship was launched, carrying the last survivors and a possession of paramount importance, a time-lock device, on a one-way trip to the Grays' home world. This would be a daring act of biological warfare against the ever-present and destructive Grays, in hopes of ridding the universe of this menace once and for all.

Sixty-five million years before, the Dinosauroids had been infected by a new virus carried to their continent by storm-borne birds. The virus killed a few weak Dinosauroids, but thereafter the survivors carried the virus in body oils exuded by their fine, delicate scales. When dried, some oils stuck to the scales and some floated freely in the air. When inhaled by the Grays, the dried particles had caused a viral outbreak impossible to stem, and most of the Grays were obliterated.

That had been an accident. Now, sixty-five million years later, with the Grays' empire once more flourishing, the Dinosauroids acted deliberately to annihilate them.

Before the launch, Betty pleaded with her lover, Chehx, a reptoid of political significance who belonged to one of the important clans of the Dinosauroids. "Send the ship and the device, but please don't leave me here alone."

"Chehx must lead, must fight." Chehx had been hatched in a privileged clan and it fell to him and the others of his brood to take this drastic course of action against the Grays. "I feel the longing and loss already for the time ahead."

Betty understood the hierarchy of these gentle creatures, for this was part of what had drawn her affection across species lines. However, during this violent and fearful hour, Betty found she could not bear to be left alone to perish. "Then take me with you," she pleaded, clinging to Chehx's arm, "I lost my family and now have only you."

Chehx had the authority to allow Betty to enter the time-lock with him and travel to the Grays' home world, because of his clan's position in the hierarchy. But to do so would only prolong the fearful time they must endure before facing death and, for this reason, Chehx refused. After an hour, Chehx finally had to physically push away Betty, who was weeping and trying to cling to him, and leave their apartment. He traveled quickly to the lone ship awaiting the launch. While the Grays' battleships began their final assault on planet Earth, the time-lock device was programmed and paired to the computers of the reptoid ship.

It managed to escape not only Earth's atmosphere, but also detection by the Grays' armada, and slip into deep space. It took nearly three hundred years of travel to get to the Grays' home world. Had the ship been detected and destroyed, the reptoids would never have known, because they traveled in time-lock.

The small ship burned through the thick atmosphere of the Grays' primary home world and impacted the surface, crippling the ship permanently. It succeeded, however, in ejecting the time-lock and activating its controls. The time-lock immediately began its program of dragging the timeline of the Reptoids into that of the Grays.

This action was detected at once by the Grays' military, and thousands of troops poured onto the new battlefield. This was exactly what the reptoids had anticipated. Unarmed and vulnerable, the reptoids merely aimed to spread as much of their virus over the planet as they could.

During their stay in the time-lock, the Dinoauroids had bred new and exotic Dinoauroids to ensure utter destruction of the Grays' home world. These were more or less mindless, aggressive, four-limbed beasts capable of running at great speed, with thickened skin like armor and vicious claws and teeth. The wrath they brought down on the Grays' cities and population was swift and decisive. Never stopping to sleep or eat, they engulfed the planet in terror and chaos. The call for reinforcements went out to the other colony worlds, but when those Grays arrived on their troubled home world, the reptoids had successfully completed their campaign.

The ships fled, but every one of them carried the contagion back to the planets they had come from, ensuring the complete extermination of the Gray empire. Almost a thousand years later, when the world ship of Neo Terra found its way to the Grays' home world, they found an agrarian society which posed no threat. You'll remember that the humans of that time took pity on the Grays and decided not to punish the survivors. They left them in peace and traveled back to orbit New Eden.

That was humanity's big mistake, Reader. Because they had found no evidence of warlike Grays nearby, they assumed the danger had been eliminated. They did not realize that the Grays' empire had stretched over vast distances.

But Abarth knew. He traveled the galaxy near and far in the world ship, searching for humanity's ancient enemy, and he found them.

Abarth now had his potential army and he wanted to get these violent, rapacious creatures back to Earth to fulfill his dreams of revenge. But he had time to spare, and he intended to find a way to use the world ship as well as the Grays, to destroy all humanity.



No one realized back then that Charger R/T had mastered the blink. He wasn't connected to the New Eden system, but used his god-like powers to replicate the process once he deciphered how it was done. He wasn't restricted to the planet, like ordinary people were. He could go anywhere.

Charger R/T blinked to the planet where he had grown up. He stood on the surface of Earth, which was encased in the black rain of the Grays' attack long ago but, to Charger R/T, that presented little problem. He could see beneath the iron encasement to the old roads and the buildings buried deep. Like a hobo, he walked the virtual roads he remembered from his boyhood.

As the years ticked past and there was no progress in finding Charger R/T, Abarth found it increasingly difficult to keep control of the church. He needed to find Charger R/T and punish the beast for Pennington's disappearance and subsequent death in order to gain favor with the congregation. The endeavors of science were constantly under threat from Abarth and his followers, for they pressed humanity to accept that science was responsible for the creation of the beast in the first place, and that medical science in particular was an abomination.

It took many years but, through hard work and deceit, Abarth managed to get members of his congregation onto the council. That meant he had the puppets he needed to force the world into accepting religion as the prime authority for moral and spiritual behaviors. One of his first acts, which had real power, was the reinstatement of the church as an equal partner with the state. Now New Eden's council would be guided by the church and ultimately by Abarth.

When he got word that a satellite sent to Earth for reconnaissance had recorded the movement of an object on its surface, Abarth suspected it might be Charger R/T. Abarth demanded high resolution images of this object and when it was discovered that the object was indeed Charger R/T, Abarth insisted science find a way to get to him.

"You are sure this new blink will do what we need?" Abarth asked the lead scientist in charge of getting back to old Earth.

"We have had success sending objects out into space some distance away from our planet using the laser beam system, but our attempts at sending living tissue have been somewhat stalled," Glenda replied. She'd been developing systems for the blink network for several years, having started from the bottom of the bureaucracy and working her way up. Now in charge of the network, she was well-informed about its abilities and limitations.

"What limitations could you possibly be facing? You have had no shortage of staff or resources. I would hate to think you're deliberately holding up progress." Abarth's voice was cruel and sharp, his tone sneering.

Glenda said calmly, "If you are willing to trust our system as it stands, feel free to step inside the chamber and we will try to blink you a few thousand kilometers out and bring you back."

Abarth's face was red with rage, but he knew the event was being televised and he could not afford to be seen as authoritarian. He quietly retorted, "I have trusted science for many years, and I have faith that you will succeed. Our belief in god has gotten us this far and I'm sure he will soon gift you the knowledge you require."

As the broadcasted session ended and Abarth was leaving the science labs, he turned to a bishop near him and whispered, "Get rid of her. I want progress, not smart-asses!" Glenda lost her job and, two months later, the first biological tests were under way. They had mixed results.

The blink system had been a form of travel limited to some very specific rules of quantum mechanics and thermodynamics, but now it ventured into unknown territory. Using a laser to guide an object to a destination only worked if the destination was in a clear line of sight and had a solid surface for the object to land on. Some attempts to send living mass to a point in space a long distance away resulted in total destruction of the biological traveler in a gruesome way.

Abarth felt his control of events once more grow tenuous as the months slipped past. Then the breakthrough came. Using the Enochs' method of hard light, a beam could be cast like a fishing line into a pond. The light could be bent around objects using gravity, and tracked in miles as it traveled, which gave science the ability to send animals a specified distance in any direction and have them safely return.

With this success, Abarth progressed to the second level of his plan, the capture and punishment of Charger R/T. Devout followers were to travel to Earth and ensnare Charger R/T in a hard-light net, then drag him back to New Eden for trial. Abarth sent a small well-armed team to Earth, but they did not return. He then sent a large force with heavy equipment and several well-trained assassins. They didn't return either. The church, now desperate, recruited and sent an army of poorly trained and hastily prepared soldiers, who arrived but also didn't come back.

Abarth was beside himself with rage. And he was right that humans had gone soft. For they

no longer possessed enough aggression to capture Charger R/T. Every night he broadcast the results to the public, showing what the monster had done to innocent young men and women. Satellite images showed the kind of destruction that Charger R/T wrought, though the deaths were quick and painless, or so they appeared.

Charger R/T found the attempts to capture him so feeble that he felt no threat. He simply blinked the attackers to planet Ceres, or Meshed, as the local inhabitants had once called the place. Meshed had remained in Charger R/T's memories from his past encounter with Marcus when the two worked on the Mars terraforming project together. These memories seemed distant and shadowed, but he realized he had inherited them from the Charger of long ago and that they didn't form part of his own experience.

Charger R/T felt quite satisfied with himself as he sent people to a forgotten and deserted world, leaving them stranded there. He thought they could repopulate it, though he made it appear that they had died. It gave him good press coverage as a true villain.

One image in particular really disturbed Abarth. It was a photo of Charger R/T just after he allegedly destroyed several attackers. Charger R/T seemed to be staring up at the satellite and smiling, as if he knew it was Abarth seeing the photo.

Abarth declared war. He would not allow Charger R/T to get away with murdering Pennington and he would most definitely not be allowed to flout Abarth. The world under Abarth's control responded.

So began the great human war on the god known as Charger R/T. In charge of this war was General Pursing, a tall, no-nonsense type of officer, whose military leadership had been forged by many years of reading and watching documentaries on war. A world authority on the lost and forgotten art of war, he trained special teams of soldiers in the arts of evasion and capture.

Abarth demanded that science rein in its beast, and ordered the most advanced technologies be used to subdue Charger R/T. Science did not fail. It produced some truly terrifying methods for General Pursing to use, and the humans trained to deploy these methods against Charger R/T practiced daily in preparation.

"We'll use the world ship because the engines are powerful enough to deploy a sizable restraining field on the beast, and with the number of troops we have, it should be relatively easy to stun this creature into submission," General Pursing said to Abarth as he drank deeply from a goblet holding sacramental wine. "Our first jump with the ship will be in a few days. We just have a few loose ends to tie up first."

The room the two sat in was considered the holy of holies, reserved for only a select few to enter. The space was dominated by white marble and ivory. Rich objects adorned the wall niches and floors. Long red, velvet drapes hung from the walls to cover decorative glass windows, and gold trim traced the ceiling above massive paintings generated by computer monitors.

Abarth sat quietly in his ostentatious chair, the one reserved for the pope. Finally, he spoke. "You are certain this system will not kill the beast? I want him returned alive, and the people will only support our endeavor if there are no more deaths."

General Pursing tugged on his gray beard and adjusted the jacket of his extensively decorated military uniform. "I was especially impressed with an old Earth episode of Wild Kingdom that I found. The method used to trap wild tigers is perfect for this military campaign. I am most confident that this plan will succeed, and with no casualties."

The last thing General Pursing did before launching was to have copied all the parts the QEP drive system, so that science could begin duplicating the quantum entangled particle drive. The plan laid out by Abarth was twofold, designed so the people of New Eden would support him as

pope and ultimately as ruler of the world.

The first part of the plan was obviously the capture and trial of Charger R/T.

The second part would once have been unthinkable, but now, moving this planet from its present location to a new orbit around Earth's sun in the Goldilocks zone, was something that humanity knew could be done. A blink system able to use hard light with lasers to beam material to any point in space combined with the planet ship's jump engines, made it now possible to dematerialize an entire planet and send its molecular mass, including the jump engines, to a new location. This meant that New Eden could be dematerialized and then rematerialized opposite Earth in an orbit around the sun.

Abarth had promised his people new lands to cultivate and own. These were needed because those people who had lived in the world ship before it was commandeered by Abarth were once again living on New Eden and the planet was getting crowded. This need for land also resulted in restoring planet Earth back to its former glory by removing the black iron shell, repairing the damage, and reseeding it with life.

Abarth knew that with two planets circling the sun, he could be a ruler as never before known in human history. And why stop there? With the QEP drive replicated and working, he could find other worlds to move into the sun's Goldilocks zone for human habitation. Grand promises of directing science to better the lives of people everywhere were just what the church needed to attract new followers.

Mars would be moved into the Goldilocks zone. Then the process of terraforming the surface could start, much easier than in Mars' old orbit.

New Eden would be chosen next. With QEP printers already in place, the world ship would jump from Earth to New Eden in a matter of a few months. Once there, the portable QEP drive could be used on New Eden to drive it back along the world ship's course and then carefully guide it into an orbit around the sun with Earth and Mars. It only made sense that Ceres would follow, for a sizable colony had managed to settle there. With four stable planets rotating in perfect balance around the sun, life would flourish. The human population would explode with abundant land for food. War and diseases had already been abolished.

Towns would grow into cities, then metropolises of incredible size and density, while all the land would be clean and plentiful. The waters would flow clear and fresh, giving a crisp cool pleasure when drunk, and birds would fill the trees with song. Abarth would rule over all of this. If he allowed humans to live at all.

Abarth finally rose from his chair and walked over to General Pursing. He placed his hand firmly on the general's shoulder and said, "I don't want any fuckups. Screw this up and I will see to it that you spend your eternity in hell!" With that, Abarth left the room. The general, shaken and nervous, responded by finding the scientists working on the QEP drive and ripping into them.

A few days later, when the two worlds were ready, they jumped both the planet ship and New Eden into a synchronized orbit around the sun on the side opposite to Earth. With perfect calculations, the solar system now had two habitable worlds for humanity to walk on. The audacity of the effort surprised even Charger R/T, who instantly became aware of the planets when they arrived. Intrigued, he blinked to the surface of New Eden for a look.

This was precisely what General Pursing had hoped for, and he immediately put his plan into operation. Charger R/T had not arrived in the center of a city or at a place where people might see him. He chose to arrive on the ice plains of the frozen northern regions, sure that his appearance would be undetected.

Because of small satellites in orbit, General Pursing knew at once where Charger R/T had landed, and ships were dispatched to the beast's location. The planet ship started spooling up the engines to generate the power needed for a containment field to encircle Charger R/T. The planet ship moved, with its magnetic drives, to hover, a dirty, black mass, over Charger R/T's head.

Suddenly, without warning, five red laser beams from the ship struck the ground surrounding Charger R/T. Then a blue plasma beam filled in the spaces the red lasers left, encircling Charger R/T in a cage of light. A magnetic field of immense power began squeezing from above and below, pinning Charger R/T and holding him fast. Several ships arrived and troops scrambled through the high, biting, cold winds to encircle the beast, drawing weapons and digging trenches ready for a fight.

Charger R/T found himself more confused than alarmed, for he didn't know why the humans were attacking him. As the restriction field began to close in and contain Charger R/T, his anger flared up and he began compressing space inside the containment field. The effect of pulling in the walls of the force field caused the planet ship's engines to surge. Then he reversed his efforts, pushing outward hard against the walls. The engines groaned with the strain.

"Damn it, man, run the engines at full throttle if need be, but keep that beast contained!" General Pursing was panicking as alarm bells sounded the imminent collapse of the field. From the general's viewpoint, in the command center of the planet ship, he could see Charger R/T beginning to expand the field and, fearful that the beast could break free, he ordered the troops to commence firing. The weapons these troops carried were sonic. They shot out bursts of high intensity sound waves which, when at full power, could tear a man's skull apart.

Charger R/T was hit from several angles by bursts of sound waves that passed easily through the force field. He winced at the momentary pain. There were snipers hidden from his view who joined in the fight, but their weapons were much more ominous. The universe contains subatomic particles called neutrinos, which are mostly harmless to humanity when scattered and moving freely. However, the weapons these snipers used compressed the neutrinos into an intense beam which Charger R/T's body armor could not stop. Patches of Charger R/T's armor began to heat up and glow red hot, causing him to twist and move with some discomfort.

"Send in the thumper!" General Pursing ordered, beads of sweat forming on his brow. The thumper was a weapon like a tank, with the ability to blink. It materialized on the battlefield and did as the name implies. With one great thump, a wave of magnetic energy, always the opposite charge to whatever it was attacking, would pound the target and crush the life from it.

Charger R/T had had enough of this fight and responded with unrestrained violence. He reversed the containment field, instantly causing soldiers close by to be drawn into the blue plasma field. Their bodies were torn from the foxholes and flung into the force field, which instantly obliterated them. Charger R/T then reversed the field again while compressing time and space around him, causing the snipers' neutrino fire to bend and hit human targets. The total energy output of the planet ship was fired back at it and, with that added to Charger R/T's own violent outburst of power, small portions of the planet exploded and tore away from it.

In the command center, General Pursing was frantic. He ordered the planet lasers to fire directly down on Charger R/T in an attempt to kill the beast, ignoring Abarth's orders of capturing it alive.

Charger R/T was quick to take advantage of this. He redirected the planet ship's laser fire to hit every tank that blinked into the battlefield.

General Pursing was enraged as he witnessed all his soldiers and weapons being destroyed by this demon. Half crazed, he commanded the planet ship to ram Charger R/T where he stood.

The crew recognized the insanity of such an order and refused to carry it out. They instead commanded the remaining members of the armed force to retreat and get clear. They would try what science called a false jump.

Scientists had discovered, quite by accident, that if the engines were reversed at exactly the right moment, the planet ship wouldn't jump, but instead send out a wave that would cause any object it hit to jump to the desired location. The engineers picked a point in deep space and locked onto a quantum entangled particle near a pulsar. They then spooled up the engine again and did the false jump.

A wave of energy emanated from the planet ship directly at Charger R/T and when it struck the surface of the frozen wastes of New Eden, a fifty-mile square chunk of the planet, with Charger R/T attached, was jumped to a distant pulsar.

A war that lasted just a few hours with a god of incomprehensible power ended not only in many dead or missing personnel, but in a chunk of the planet New Eden being ripped out and hurled through space. A council of the people was convened in the following days as General Pursing and Abarth were placed in confinement to answer charges of genocide.

In the end, it was determined that Abarth was ultimately responsible for this debacle, and he was sentenced to having the blink mechanism removed from his body and being incarcerated in a containment field for the rest of his natural life. Even though this could mean eternity, it was considered by most as a kind punishment.

Charger R/T, on the other hand, felt only amusement when he realized where he was. He sat there on a broken piece of the planet New Eden, circling the pulsar and mesmerized by its steady blinking. At times the freezing temperature of space would make his planet chunk very cold, and he would be encapsulated in a block of ice. Then it would swing close to the pulsar and heat up, creating a balmy day or two for Charger R/T to enjoy the warmth. There was no other movement. There was no sound.

He really appreciated the peace and quiet.

✖

#### **DART SPEAKS TO READER:**

No, I didn't tell you much about repairing the damage the Grays inflicted during the Night of the Black Rain, did I?

You want to know how we removed iron shell that covered all of Earth? Well, we thought of using a can opener, but actually, we peeled it like an orange.

Ha ha, I'm just kidding.

No, seriously, we made it rain for forty days and forty nights. Water and air quickly turn iron into rust, or iron oxide, which is flaky and crumbly and much easier to gather and remove than solid iron. Iron in the oceans and lakes was no problem either. Just so you know, there are more than two dozen types of bacteria that eat iron.

Then we repaired the soil and water and seeded the planet with plants and animals. You can be sure we did right by our old world, Reader, for at the core of every human who ever lived, no matter their job or their wealth, is a heart that holds dear our original birthplace.

What's a Goldilocks zone? Didn't I explain that? It's the orbit around our sun which is the most conducive for the survival of life.

Yes, I agree, it's wonderful. We move planets around now!

## Chapter 11 Abarth attacks humanity

Crime in this time had dwindled to nearly nothing, so Abarth's prison held only two other prisoners. One was called Jet, the other Spyder.

The place they lived was nothing like the prisons of old, for it had no provisions for rehabilitation or diversions to alleviate the quiet solitude. It had no judges, no lawyers, no psychologists. This prison was a containment field, an existence divorced from normal experience. The technology that created such living hell was an offshoot of the Grays' own black projects, as different from the time-lock as could be imagined. Humanity's modern judicial practice was to place the offenders in the deepest, blackest hole in existence and forget about them.

It was easy to understand why Abarth was imprisoned, for he had driven humanity to a needless war based on his vanity. Jet had also destroyed many humans. Spyder, a tall man with dark hair and eyes, a cold smile, and a voice like warm honey, was a psychopath who had killed his entire family and been caught only because he'd overlooked one very minor detail. He was also a member of Abarth's church.

Jet was constantly disappointed by humanity, for he held it to very high standards. "We achieve ever-increasing heights on the evolutionary ladder," he often said, "but we fall right back into the cesspit of human arrogance. We always do." A New Eden native, he dressed the way he thought scientists of old had done, with a white lab coat and dark-rimmed glasses. He'd tried the Einstein look, but wild hair hadn't worked for him, so he wore it shoulder-length and smooth. This made his gaunt face look thinner than it was.

Jet felt that the mind was the root cause of humanity's inability to better itself and he aimed to change that. He had started small, meddling with the intellectual powers of animals at first, creating mutations in the genetic structures that favored genuine logical thought rather than mindless instincts or emulation of others. Jet made monsters of simple animals that seldom seemed to favor intellect over their base needs. He had house cats which spoke and interacted but were unholy terrors toward prey. He had smart raptors that astonished in their willingness to torture and oppress the offspring of other raptors merely to make their own genes dominant.

When Jet finally graduated to working on humans, the scientific community rejected his proposals. The establishment felt it was too dangerous to genetically alter the natural ability to learn, and they put a stop to his work. Jet was left with only one option. He enhanced his own mental powers to prove the value that his achievement would bring to all mankind. This did not convince the scientists.

Jet then decided humanity did not deserve to exist. He accused humans of being controlling, reckless, domineering, and petty, all traits he despised but which described him accurately. Jet decided to put an end to his imperfect species, and the means he created almost succeeded.

The tool was a violent strain of bacteria, enhanced with a rudimentary brain, and the ability to learn and adapt. Like a quantum computer, Jet built smart microbial molecular brains and filled them with rage, then inserted them into strains of bacteria lethal to human life. When he released them, they hunted in packs, using air, water, and time as methods of transport.

Great cities were brought to their knees with this pestilence, as millions of nearly immortal humans rotted and decayed in excruciating pain. It was Abarth's bid for power that resolved this crisis, for he promised the people that if they followed his church, and made him world leader, he would defeat this apocalypse. And he did defeat it.

So, it amused Jet that Abarth now found himself in prison with the one member of humanity he had actually fought and defeated. "Oh, how the mighty have fallen," Jet sang out to torment Abarth.

"Shut the hell up!" Abarth would snap, but Jet just droned on.

"Shut up!" Abarth snarled as he covered his ears, never really able to block out Jet's comments.

"All I wanted was to make us better and smarter, able to realize our mistakes and correct them, but not you. Oh no, not the great leader, Abarth! You wanted power and complete control, but I nearly got you and you know it," Jet continued in his monotone voice.

"God damn it, shut up!" Abarth snapped repeatedly.

Spyder sat back, watching and listening, but saying nothing.

"I should not be in here," Jet went on, polishing his hornrims on the tail end of the lab coat. "I am not a criminal like you. All I wanted was to help my fellow man, to lift him intellectually. You are one who deserves to be in here, you're the real villain."

Jet's droning was driving Abarth insane.

It was true that Jet wanted to help humanity, but rejection had driven him to near madness. When Abarth had finally achieved enough power, he set out to end Jet's plague. So, with voodoo mystic religious overtones, and a big supply of rattling chicken bones, the great Abarth ordered his followers to hunt down and capture Jet. He created a containment field and placed Jet in it. Then he tortured Jet until the man revealed the method necessary for stopping the bacteria. Now he found himself in the same prison, much to Jet's delight.

Abarth tried to manipulate and deceive both Jet and Spyder. Jet believed Abarth was a loyal friend. Spyder knew what was happening but pretended to be fooled. He flattered Abarth by admiring his work as leader of the church and learned far more about its operation than Abarth realized. A year passed, during which Abarth created a plan to escape. That year felt nearly as long as the hundreds they'd already spent in this place. Abarth requested a toy from the council, something to pass the time as a reward for good behavior. What he wanted was a small Korean hand drum, from a forgotten world in a long past forgotten time. It was a simple drum with a handle, looking much like a frying pan. On each side of the drumhead was fastened a string with a heavy knot on the end. When the handle was rotated between two hands, the knots struck the drumhead and beat out a tone. His request was granted. The toy became his weapon.

Abarth began beating out a hypnotic rhythm with the drum, repeating the pattern endlessly, every moment of every day, until the warder stormed into Abarth's room threatening to kill him. Abarth kept the toy from the grabbing hands of the guard until he was close to the man. Then he struck.

There is a point on the human body, a point never shown to the martial artist, a point too vulnerable for common knowledge. From the same place as the hand drum had come thousands of years before, great masters of death knew the point one must strike with vicious intent in order to kill a fellow being. No matter that humanity was close to immortality, this one point on the human body, if struck with precision and sufficient force, guaranteed death. Abarth had no difficulty in killing the guard. Now, holding the device that controlled the containment field, he had access to freedom. He released Jet and Spyder. He had plans for both of them.

"You are positive this will work?" Abarth asked as the three slipped away from the area where they had been confined.

"Absolutely! Just get me to the world ship and I will prove it," Jet replied, his voice less of a drone but still mesmerizing. With the help of Abarth's devout followers, the three men eluded

detection long enough to have their blink mechanisms surgically reinstalled and to board the world ship in orbit around New Eden. Though it had been made difficult to gain entrance to the ship, with Abarth's followers as lackeys, Abarth and Jet got to the engine room. Spyder was set to guarding the door.

Jet's idea turned out to be brilliant, to Abarth's surprise. From the engine room, he created a false jump inside the ship which emitted a wave that bounced every crew member aboard out into distant space. Then, under his guidance, the world ship jumped from its orbit, leaving chaos in its wake. The stolen ship traveled along the route Dayton had created once before, to the Grays' home world.

Dayton had made only one mistake those many years ago. He found no evidence nearby of warlike Grays, never realizing the vastness of the Grays' empire. But Abarth explored the universe in great detail with his mind, searching for humanity's ancient enemy, and he had found them. In a small corner of space, orbiting the star in an insignificant solar system, distant from the Grays' main empire, existed one planet with technologically advanced Grays.

These Grays were clever, devious, and careful. They had answered the call to help the home world against the Dinosauroids' attack, but quickly realized the futility of the effort. Instead, using containment fields, they had captured the few remaining reptoids and, with these abhorrent beasts, began the long process of genetically blending the physiology of the two species, thus eliminating the effect of the reptoids' deadly virus. What Abarth found, in his bid to avenge the mistreatment of his family and his church, was a community of horrific creatures. They were perfect for his needs, primitive and violent, yet intelligent. Their society was a highly structured, savage hierarchy designed to benefit the strong and powerful.

Abarth's approach was to misrepresent himself as a god, configuring his appearance to the Grays' mythology to ensure full compliance. He had Jet perform apparently magical feats using advanced technology. He had Spyder mesmerizing them with words spoken like a soft but insistent drumbeat. With his two acolytes, he brought down thunder and lightning, fire and brimstone, until the creatures fell in line and followed him as their new deity. The blending of the Grays' synthetic anatomy with that of the hybrid and violent reptoid created a highly intelligent, but superstitious life form twice the size of their ancestors.

Abarth now had his army. He just needed to get these creatures back to his own solar system to get his revenge. With Jet's help, he would find a way to use the world ship.

Although Jet wanted to help humanity, he had never found a single friend willing to help him when he needed it. His intelligence had been well above that of most people, even before he experimented on himself. But, because he had no friends and didn't like interacting with people, he didn't understand emotions and was therefore gullible. Abarth preyed on this weakness of Jet's, twisting and contorting the truth until it suited his needs. So, when he asked Jet to remove the DNA safety lockout that Dayton had employed to ensure that no alien life forms could ever board the world ship, Jet was only too eager to comply.

Spyder understood emotions, though he felt none himself. He knew that Abarth was vindictive, and that Jet was naive, just as he knew those qualities would someday destroy both men. He bided his time, observing and learning as much as he could. Sooner or later, his time would come. Sooner or later Abarth would step into his web.

Jet spent the better part of two years reconstructing the world ship into a weapon of awesome power, while Abarth trained his mutant Gray army in the secrets of killing humans. Like a madman willing to beat a dog to ensure its savagery, Abarth made certain that his new Gray army would prove worse than savage.

"I need only a few more weeks to complete my work on the world ship's neutrino system, so you must be patient," Jet said to Abarth, as they stood at the balcony window of the temple created by Gray drones at his command. "It has to be completed if we are going to destroy humanity without destroying the infrastructure of the cities."

"You told me two months ago that you were almost ready!" Abarth snapped as he paced back and forth in front of the balcony window. Abarth was careful to always appear in the guise of a Gray god before his army, but here alone with Jet, he appeared as his typical impatient human self.

"Well, I never expected to have to do all the work alone. You could have given some of the lesser Grays fingers without claws. Having delicate equipment shredded by easily frustrated beasts is not helpful!" Jet replied firmly. His willingness to help was being strained hard with Abarth's impatience.

Abarth always seemed to recognize the magic line that he must never cross and would sweet-talk Jet back into compliance every time he neared it.

"That's all right, Jet, I know you're trying. Remember that what we do here is bigger than both of us. Humanity needs to pay for what they did to you. If only they had been willing to at least try what you were proposing, then it wouldn't be necessary to punish them." Abarth whined the same way he always did when he wanted something. "I don't blame you for seeking revenge. I think they deserve it and that's why I am so willing to help you."

This was Abarth's way of making it seem like Jet was the one leading the venture. "When we get back to the home worlds and have subdued those who stand in the way of progress, you can decide who will live and who will die. That's what you want, isn't it? Remember, we do this for science!" As Abarth spoke, he hovered around Jet, trying to reassure him with gentle touches. These always made Jet feel uncomfortable and threw off his focus on logical reasoning.

Abarth's tactics were designed to do more than encourage Jet to do his bidding. He needed to be able to approach Jet and make physical contact a routine matter, because one day he would no longer need the man and being near enough to touch meant killing him would be easy. "You must have much to do, so I should let you get back to work. We will leave when you are good and ready." Abarth returned to the balcony that overlooked the crowds of Gray mutants below.

The neutrino weapon was very necessary, for though Abarth had many Grays at his disposal, the four worlds contained billions of people. The neutrino weapon was a brilliant piece of technology. What Jet had created was a method of using the sun's own energy, in the form of impossibly small and almost undetectable neutrinos. These would disrupt the molecules of living beings and, by breaking the bonds that held them together, scatter to dust all within the weapon's range, leaving the cities intact.

Jet was horrified by the weapon he'd created, so Abarth promised to use it only as a last resort. It should, perhaps, have been obvious to Jet that Abarth had every intention of using the weapon, but his desire to help humanity blinded him to Abarth's manipulations.

Two months passed before Jet said to Abarth, "I have mastered the systems. We can get the Grays onboard now without problems from Dayton's lockouts, which means we have full control over the ship's systems. I have also finished the neutrino weapon, though I do not intend that we will ever use it. The threat should suffice."

Abarth responded coolly, "I won't let you down. I'm sure humanity will accede to your demands. We just want them to understand that we are doing this to better them as a people, and to show them that their government is conspiring with science to hold back progress."

Jet relaxed and pushed his hornrims onto the top of his head. He understood very well the

destructive powers this weapon could wield. Neutrinos had always been accepted as perfectly harmless to life, so small that they almost never interacted with particles of any type.

What Jet had created was like his smart viruses, which were large enough to hold quantum sized brains that provided a limited form of intellect. Here the neutrinos were bonded together to create super-sized neutrinos, still with the ability to pass through any object. By adding a limited form of intelligence to these mutant neutrinos, the weapon was able to target only living bodies, like a smart bomb. The neutrinos would excite the cells of the body, creating friction and heat which vaporized all the moisture. The result was a pile of ash where a human once stood.

"Did you add the protection code to the weapon as I suggested?" Abarth asked slyly.

"The weapon cannot be detonated without the code and I'm grateful you suggested I do that." Jet replied, confident that he was the only one who knew the code.

Jet was a scientist, not a student of human nature, so it never occurred to him that the other two conspirators would look at his work. But Abarth and Spyder rarely missed any information they could use for leverage, so they knew full well what the code was.

With Abarth taking the form of the Grays' new supreme god, he ordered these monstrosities of blended Dinosaurians and Grays to board the world ship for departure. Excited and mostly out of control, this army rampaged through the interior of the black world and destroyed the beauty of a space once created to please the human eye. In the year-long travel through space, they laid waste to every building and every town, so that when it finally arrived in Earth's solar system, the interior of the world ship was as black as the exterior. This Gray army even made it a point to defecate on any place where humanity once stood, in an attempt to defile the works of man. They had also spent the year working themselves into a frenzy and, when the ship finally made orbit again around New Eden, it took everything Abarth had to restrain and control them.

When the world ship again dominated the night sky, the reappearance of the moon that New Eden had once enjoyed came as quite a shock to the citizens. The four worlds that circled the sun — Earth, New Eden, Mars, and Ceres — all became aware of its arrival within minutes. At first the moon was welcomed, the people assuming that government computers had managed to return it to its place of origin. Then Abarth's army struck with such savagery and violence that everyone simply panicked.

The first world to be invaded was New Eden. The Grays poured down onto the surface from transport ships. Slashing and tearing the flesh of frantic citizens, the Grays tore bodies limb from limb in an orgy of violence before finally hitting the one spot on the body which killed the tormented.



"This is impossible! I thought people had gained immortality because of the longevity program!" Delliam yelled at his sister Bethillian, as they struggled to stay ahead of the surging mob of frightened city dwellers. Delliam held his younger sister's hand, and they raced down a side street in their bid to escape.

Bethillian sobbed as the two tripped and stumbled over more broken and shattered bodies, strewn on the roads like toys in a child's room. "I'm scared," Bethillian cried as she was yanked along by Delliam.

"Here, in this building!" Delliam yelled as he shoved his sister, almost tossing her small body through the doorway. Bethillian hit the floor with a thud and, scrambling to her feet, kept on running. The two dashed down the hallway and then up stairways, climbing until they reached

the roof. The sounds of violence faded behind them.

The two were panting for air, but this was an automatic reaction since such response was now unnecessary due to the longevity program. Then they saw a small spacecraft hovering just above them. The two were hiding behind the building's rooftop mechanical units when Dart called down to them, "Here!"

Bethillian had barely time to glance up as Delliam was already in action. He pulled on her arm, yanking her along as they ran toward the small ship and climbed aboard. Without hesitating, Dart throttled the small craft to full speed to make good their escape.

"What the hell is happening?" Delliam asked Dart as he fastened his sister into the seat harness.

"I have no idea, but being here is not safe," replied Dart, as he swerved the small craft between buildings. Several Gray reptoids leapt from windows or roofs, trying to grab the escaping ship, but Dart was quick to react. Time seemed to slow down as he zig-zagged, almost being caught by rabid Grays bent on killing everything.

They really had nowhere to run. Because war had become a thing of the past, there were no military bases where they could find safety. And, the way things looked, even military bases wouldn't be safe.

"Where are we going?" Delliam asked as he fastened himself into the co-pilot's seat next to Dart.

"I was hoping you might have an idea," Dart replied, looking rather frazzled. "I just thought we shouldn't be where we were." The small craft had the appearance of something Henry Ford might have built when the car was a new creation but, for all its primitive features, the tiny craft was well equipped and technologically superior to most of that size.

It was Bethillian who replied. "We could go to the country house. That might be safe." Her family's country house was not on New Eden but hidden on a small orbiting rock just a scant few miles across. Sometimes they went there when her father wanted to get away from people.

"That's a good idea," Delliam replied, confident that the invaders wouldn't be interested in what looked like just a bare asteroid. Not yet, anyway. "I will punch in the coordinates; it shouldn't take us more than a few hours to reach."

"Sounds fine to me," Dart said as he relinquished control to Delliam. "Any place has to be better than here."



Behind the tiny, fast-moving craft, an intense, brilliant light filled the sky. Abarth had used the neutrino weapon from the command center of the world ship, while Jet watched in horror. "What are you doing? You said you wouldn't use the weapon!" Jet stammered, as his body shook violently.

"I tried to talk to them, but no one answered," Abarth replied as he again pressed the button to unleash the neutrinos. "When they finally did respond, they said they were not interested in listening to you, so I ordered the attack. Then they threatened to retaliate so I used the weapon to let them know you're serious."

"Stop saying, 'you'!" Jet snapped. He was starting to realize the extent of the calamity befalling the human race. "I don't think you're doing this for my benefit."

"That's simply not true," Abarth said, with such sorrow in his voice that Jet felt nauseated, then Abarth again hit the button. "Have I not stood beside you through this whole ordeal? Did I

not rescue you from that prison? A prison with a system that unfairly condemned you and your brilliant work?"

"Yes, but..." Jet tried.

"Yes, but what?" Abarth placed a hand on Jet's shoulder and, with his free hand, hit the button again. "This is the price humanity must pay for unjustly imprisoning you. You watch, the government will soon relent and then we can go about the process of improving on the human condition." It didn't matter in the least to Abarth that some of the people below him were his devoted followers; he just kept pressing the button and unleashing the deadly neutrinos.

Spyder stood at the viewing window, smiling.

## Chapter 12 Fighting back

Dart's small craft moved swiftly away from the fighting while the three occupants nervously speculated on what was happening behind them. As they approached the small asteroid where Bethillian's family had a country home, the building and the surrounding gardens responded to their approach. Light, heat, and oxygen all switched on. The feeling of being welcomed home made the three feel a little more relaxed.

"So, what do we do now?" asked Bethillian, as she entered the home and tossed her coat on a rack.

"Turn on the interface and let's see if there's any news," Delliam said. He hurried toward the main room.

The other three worlds reported shocking news, with people standing terrified and unable to act. New Eden was being consumed by the Gray horde as they rampaged out of control. Seeing little resistance, Abarth began sending forces to Earth and Mars. Everywhere, people were too terrified to resist. The only thing humanity could do was to blink out of their planetary system into space.

The blink system had been designed for the safety of humans and, normally, it would never have allowed people to blink into empty space. But empty space was the only safe option now and so it worked. Millions began abandoning the planets in a desperate bid to survive.



"There, you see, I was right! The rats are all running away. Soon the worlds will surrender to you, and then you can go and show mercy," Abarth said confidently, as he turned the weapon on the peoples of Earth and Mars and repeatedly pressed the button. Ceres was not spared, but the crafty nature of the humans who took the form of Dwarves had driven them to hide in their many caves. Abarth assumed they had all run away. The Grays, which soon occupied Ceres, indeed found very few Dwarves to torment and kill.



"I wish my father were here," Dart blurted.

Curious, Bethillian asked, "Who is your father?"

This caught Dart off guard, for he didn't realize he had spoken aloud. There was a long pause before he answered. "My biological father is the guy that we fought a little over four hundred years ago, the one we sent off into deep space."

"What? You mean that monster, the guy called Charger R/T? That's your dad?" Delliam asked in astonishment. The incident with Charger R/T was a vivid piece of history, and people everywhere remembered it.

Dart realized that he had probably over-stayed his welcome, and cursed the fact that sometimes he didn't know when to shut up.

"Come to think of it, he would be kind of handy right about now. But I seriously doubt that he would show much compassion," Delliam said.

"From what I know of him, he does seem to understand us, and history records him as helping. Well, sort of helping." Dart was never very good at defending his father.

"Seriously? Who was your mother? I mean, really, look at the size of that guy," Bethillian said, not giving too much thought to how her question sounded. "And it's not like he's some kind of superhero type. He might even help the invaders kill us, or get us killed."

Bethillian did not realize how her words impacted Dart. He always tried to appear as if he accepted what people said.

"Let's say for a moment we could get to Charger R/T. Do you think you could persuade him to help us?" asked Delliam, as he turned away from the chaos being reported on the view screens.

"If we could get to him, I'm sure he would help. The problem is that we used the world ship to cast him out and, since that's being used to attack us, there's no chance we could steal it back and go find him," Dart said.

"Well, we might not be able to get the world ship," Delliam said, "but my father is the guy who modified the blink system we use today. Lately he's been working in a lab on Crest, that's a planet a few light years from here. It was appropriated by congress a number of years back, chosen for its proximity to its star. It seems that the orbit of Crest and the surrounding planets make it ideal for the type of science my father does."

"It might be easier to get people to start fighting back than it would be for us to get to planet Crest," Dart replied. As good as the blink system was, that stretch of distance was just way out of reach.

"Tell him," Delliam said to his younger sister.

She sat for a moment, then realized what her brother was asking. "Our father comes home from work once a month on weekends to visit us. He has a direct link to Crest from this house and also from our house in the hills above Eur. The scientists created way points on planets in stable orbits and they're used as a way to blink from planet to planet until you get to Crest."

"So you see," Delliam added, "we do have a way to get to my father, and from there he might be able to help us get to your father. That is, if you're interested in trying."

"The longer we stay here, the more people are dying. Let's go!" Dart exclaimed. He chose to appear passive at times, but he liked action better than words.

The three moved to the basement of the house and Delliam entered his father's code to activate the blink system. The distance was so vast that the process of transiting was going to take a few days of travel.



Earth was the first to fall, followed by Mars, then New Eden. Ceres appeared abandoned and therefore was of little concern to Abarth. He had won his victory and enjoyed his revenge. Jet was devastated at the great loss of life and pleaded with Abarth to stop the continuing slaughter by the rampaging Gray mutants. Even with the absolute surrender of the passive humans, the Grays continued relentlessly.

Those humans who blinked to avoid the fighting had no place to go, and ended up blinking on a one-way trip to nowhere. They found themselves floating in the vast empty void of cold space, unable to return, and not knowing whether they would die or be trapped there for eternity.

Abarth gloated as he stood before the government council that he had demanded face him now. That council had once imprisoned him, and he relished the thought of unleashing his Gray mutants like wild dogs to torment and terrify them. "You see?" Abarth snapped as he repeatedly poked his index finger into the chest of one of the council members. "This is what you get for

being passive! I told you that humans had become sheep! I told you that I would be the only one capable of leading us all to greatness! You should have punished the doctor that killed my wife and daughters!"

One of the leaders stood up. "In all fairness to you, Dr. Mannish is a quack. She clearly had no idea of the medical procedures required by the longevity program, and she should have been prosecuted to the full extent of the law. However, as the law preventing the prosecution of medical doctors using the experimental procedure had just been enacted, our hands were tied. If it will stop this madness, I can promise you the government will make an exception and prosecute her." The man who offered this was a cowardly little man, a lawyer, and his hopes of swaying Abarth fell on deaf ears.

"If you truly want to make amends for your transgressions against my family, then feel free to step in front of my neutrino weapon and press that big red button there," Abarth replied in an icy voice, as he pointed to the control panel that fired the weapon. The man looked around nervously, then responded, "If you kill me, then it is unlikely you will get justice from the law."

Abarth laughed. "I *am* the law! And what makes you think I want justice? I have already sent troops out hunting for Dr. Mannish. When I find her, she will spend a significant amount of time realizing her mistake. As for you and your kind, I will find my justice in your deaths!"

Jet watched the madness unfold as he stood by in silence, guilt-ridden and broken in spirit over the deaths of countless millions of humans. He had become death incarnate and was trying desperately to reason this through. He just could not fathom how his great intelligence and willingness to benefit humanity could have led to all this carnage. He stared blankly at the monitors that showed the Grays' campaign of destruction as it went on. Jet finally felt compelled to speak as he witnessed a young woman clutching a child and being savagely beaten, "Abarth, can we stop these Grays now, please? I'm sure we have succeeded beyond anything you dreamed of."

Spyder looked at Jet in amazement. "What do you care about these people?"

Then Abarth turned to Jet, annoyed and frustrated at the display of sympathy being shown. He snapped, "As the god is my witness, if you don't stop interrupting me, I swear I will turn my troops on you!"

Jet was intellectually brilliant but, like most humans approaching immortality, he had become a pacifist. The look on his face spoke volumes. He was an unwilling accomplice and helpless to stop the slaughter.

Abarth still had need of Jet and, realizing he had crossed the line again, tamped his anger down and tried to soothe the man. "I realize this is difficult for you, but we have to be strong. We cannot allow these mongrels to dissuade us from our righteous course. My faith in you and in god have gotten us this far. If it helps, I will pull back the forces, but if just one of them steps out of line, we must respond with full force."

Jet was relieved that Abarth was stopping the slaughter. But it was not done soon enough for the woman and her child. The images of their deaths were burned into Jet's retinas, a picture he knew he would see forever.



When Dart, Delliam and Bethillian arrived unannounced at planet Crest's main laboratories, the staff were both alarmed and confused, for their blink system was supposed to have a secure interface. Disassembling human matter and transporting it along a beam of hard light, then

reassembling it at a specific location, was not something that was considered easily done. The science behind the blink system was both highly complex and back engineered from the Grays' technology. Alarms rang out as the trio suddenly appeared on the blink pad in the main lobby of the building, sending security forces into overdrive. Aiming exotic weapons, the guards surrounded the trio.

Delliam exclaimed, "Whoa, hold up there! We come in peace!"

Bethillian added, "We are here to see my dad, something terrible has happened!"

One of the guards looked at Dart and asked, "And who are you?"

"I hope I'm a reassembled Dart, but I'm wondering if I got some of Bethillian's matter mixed up with mine," he replied, without much thought to what he was saying.

"You really are silly," Bethillian said to Dart with a shy smile.

Planet Crest was the closest thing to a military base humanity still had. A long-ago presidential order had seen to that. The three found themselves escorted to a conference room where they waited until Bethillian's father showed up with several other people.

At seeing her father, Bethillian fairly exploded with information. Her father, Tegra-Duran, lovingly wrapped his arms around her and asked her to be quiet.

"I know, dear, we've been getting the news out here too. I sent security to find you both, but you weren't where you were supposed to be." Tegra-Duran looked at Dart. "I'm guessing you had something to do with that?"

Dart nodded.

"Well, I'm grateful to you for helping my kids. My wife, Gerdra, was worried sick."

"Dad," Delliam said, "This guy's father is Charger R/T, and if we can find him, Dart thinks he can persuade the monster to help us."

Tegra-Duran stared at Dart for some time, then finally reacted by saying, "Well, I've heard quite a bit about you. Am I to understand you've accepted that Charger R/T is your real father?"

Without giving Dart time to answer, Tegra-Duran pressed on. "I met your father once. I'm the guy that stopped him from destroying all of us. I put that bastard in the time-lock!" Tegra-Duran's voice was vibrant with emotion. "I sincerely doubt the freak would be willing to give us the time of day, much less any help. Anyway, our most recent encounters with the monster have shown it to be more or less impotent."

"My father won against Abarth and his followers once before, and I'm guessing he could do it again. I don't see humans being up to the task of stopping the slaughter happening right now." Dart spoke quietly.

Tegra-Duran was torn. He was grateful for Dart's help with his kids but loathed the monster he had once fought. "So you plan to just go ask that sick fuck to come back and help us? Is that your plan?" Tegra-Duran's mocking tone and clear distaste for Charger R/T even set his kids back a little. They had never seen this side of him.

Bethillian spoke and her gentle, graceful ways quieted the room. "Dad, it can't hurt. People are dying."

The people gathered in the conference room were shocked by the news that humans, so close to being immortal, were now actually dying. "Dad, can we get to him?" Delliam asked. The room was silent for some time.

Tegra-Duran finally let a long-drawn-out breath escape his lungs. He stood up and walked to the corner of the room and looked out a window at the green beauty of Crest. "Yes, we can get to him. We've known his location for a number of years now. We sent a small orbital probe which has been watching the monster, on its clump of icy ground, circle a pulsar, and we have been

considering methods of finally destroying it."

As Tegra-Duran spoke, a few members of this quasi-scientific military post revealed plans drawn up over time, plans that described the methods which had been considered for killing Charger R/T once and for all.

Dart asked, "Would any of these plans work on the maniacs attacking our home world right now?"

A stern-looking officer nearby replied, "These systems are untested and several years away from completion."

"Well, then..." Dart said, leaving the words hanging in the air unfinished.

"If it kills you, that's on you!" Tegra-Duran snapped.

Another officer spoke to Dart after Tegra-Duran waved his hand. "Please come with me. We have a dark matter system that's been very successful lately. It will transport you to the beast."

"Dark matter?" Dart questioned. His sentences were growing shorter as time passed. He wondered if he'd inherited that trait from Charger R/T.

"Yes, the science behind this new blink system is revolutionary. A few scientists discovered by accident that dark matter extends across our universe in ribbons or rivers. We have sent several probes across unbelievably vast distances within moments by having them hitchhike a ride on these fast-flowing bands of deep matter." As the two walked the hallways of the laboratory, Dart noticed strange events happening behind glass windows, obviously experiments in new sciences.

"Deep matter?" Dart said to no one in particular. The officer, thinking it was a question, answered.

"Well, it is matter. It has substance and mass, and it's dark because it's invisible to the naked eye. But we were surprised when we discovered it's deep and flowing fast, like a river. You enter the river, or stream, and it travels into deep space, never stopping, never emptying into anything resembling a lake or ocean. It's like never-ending white-water rapids."

"That's amazing!" Dart said.

"Yeah, I guess it is," The officer replied, then added, "We had a few mishaps when we first tried it. Getting out of the river is a bit tricky, and calculating just when to leave is insanely important. Get out too soon and you might end up nowhere, get out too late and you might end up deep inside a planet or star." The officer laughed as he described this experimental new blink system.

"But it does work, right?" Dart asked, a bit anxiously.

"It has for our probes, but we haven't tried a living being yet," The officer replied in a serious tone.

Dart stopped dead in his tracks.

"Relax," the officer said, placing a hand on Dart's shoulder. "What's the worst that can happen? You might die if you try this system. But the alternative is dying when Abarth and his army kill us all."

The next few hours saw Dart poked and prodded, injected with several needles and subdermal probes. "Is all this stuff important for the trip?" Dart asked the officer.

"Hell, no." The officer laughed. "It's fully automated. I think one of the shots you got tells the telemetry your position in space, and that one is very important. The others are things for the science guys. They plan on learning stuff from this event."

"So I'm an event now." Dart rubbed the many sores his body was suffering.

"You certainly are. We've sent just three probes by 'dark-blink.' You will be number four."

Dart's expression said he was having serious doubts about being an event, but the scientists prevented him from changing his mind by guiding him to a table and asking him to lie on it. The table rotated vertically, leaving Dart at a forty-five-degree angle. He was sprayed with a fine liquid mist, which one of the scientists said would protect his skin.

After the mist dried, a machine picked him off the table and loaded him into a tube. He would be fired out into the 'dark-blink' like a bullet leaving a rifle.



Dart's vision blurred and time seemed to stand still. He had been launched into the dark-blink river and, as the officer had said, it felt like being on a raft in white water rapids. He was tossed about like a small wood chip. His landing on the surface of what was once a chunk of New Eden, now in orbit around a pulsar, was not well-planned. He was face-planted into the frozen dirt and his eyes filled with tears of pain.

But, there before him, frozen solid in ice, sat Charger R/T. Since Dart had landed more or less at his feet, he had to look up at his father. Way up.

"Well, I have to admit," Dart muttered as he stood up and brushed the dirt from his clothing, "they did get me close to the target. Any closer and I might have ended up inside my father's ass."

Dart reached up and waved a hand in front of Charger R/T's frozen face, but there was no response. Then he made a fist and knocked on Charger R/T's forehead, but still the beast did not stir. Dart tried talking. "Hello! Is anyone alive in there?" The silence was deafening.

Dart reached down, made a snowball, then chucked it at Charger R/T's face. He tried walking all around the beast, testing different spots on the ice to see if that would cause his father to stir, and still nothing worked. For almost an hour, Dart tried in vain to rouse him. The beast ignored him. Dart finally plopped down on the ice and snow in front of the frozen carcass. Maybe talking would work.

Dart decided to speak his mind instead of trying to be tolerant and accepting. "You probably don't know this, but you're my biological father. Yeah, that's right, you're my dad. How did this happen, you ask? Well, it seems the man who raised me, a doctor and the only real father I ever knew, snapped up a piece of your genetic material to save my biological mother."

Dart made another snowball but didn't throw it. "Oh, by the way, your genetic material got her killed, but not before I was birthed. Her name was Reanna. I would think you might be a bit interested to know that. But what the hell do you care? You're just this big block of frozen stupidity. I don't even know what to call you. Are you human or not?" Dart hefted the snowball and continued talking.

"I defended you, man! But what the hell do you care? You're just one big wrecking ball in life, and you don't care who you get killed." He was frustrated at getting no response from the block of ice in front of him. It wouldn't hurt to try yelling at it. "What the fuck? Hey, you stupid shit! How about you blink or breathe or something, since I came all this way for you!"

No response. Dart got up and paced around. He pitched the snowball at the mountain of ice entombing his father. "I can wait forever if I have to. Just so you know, people are dying because you won't help!"

Then Dart stormed up to Charger R/T, unzipped his fly, and urinated on his father's foot. "See that? I had fifty cups of coffee before I left. I may even have the power to thaw you out, man!"

Dart stormed off, looking for a good-sized rock he could use to chip the ice from around Charger R/T's head. He found one and struggled to lift it from the surface. When it wouldn't budge, he screamed in fury. He turned around, intending to scream at his father.

Charger R/T was standing now, huge and apparently unfrozen, staring with those blank white eyes straight into Dart's face. "What the hell is wrong with you, boy? Your whining is like fingernails on a chalkboard."

Dart stood there dumbfounded, finally at a loss for words.

Charger R/T appeared to roll his eyes. He then reached out and, with his great index finger, poked Dart hard in the chest.

When Dart recovered from the poke, he found himself back in the lab, much to the shock of the scientists in the room. His sudden appearance set off alarms as troops poured into the lab, searching for somebody to subdue. Over the intercom came Tegra-Duran's voice, "Am I to understand you had no success?"

Dart was beside himself with rage. "Send me back!" he demanded. He again endured a plethora of needles before being taken back into the launching room. Dart turned to a scientist and commented, "The last time you guys launched me, I almost landed in one of Charger R/T's kidneys. Could you back up the landing spot a bit?"

Dart was again sprayed with mist and shot into the dark-blink river. He landed a few feet away from the first point he had hit, but again, his face was planted into the ground. He struggled to his feet, adjusted his clothing, and looked up to see Charger R/T standing right behind him.

All Charger R/T said was, "You're beginning to annoy me." He poked Dart in the chest. Bang! Dart was back in the lab.

"This is getting old!" Dart snapped as the lab techs scattered away from him, shocked by his sudden appearance. Troops again poured into the room, responding to ringing alarms. Tegra-Duran was standing on an elevated floor looking down into the lab. Dart caught sight of his disgusted expression.

"I can do this!" Dart shouted. "I can! I can do this!" As the lab techs again hit him from all directions with needles, he asked, "Is any of this telemetry helping? Because I'm beginning to feel like a pin cushion." Dart had a few choice words for the launch tech, too, explaining the poor choice of landing procedures they employed. Then he was yet again sprayed and launched into the dark-blink river.

This time Dart landed short of the surface. In fact, he was several feet above the surface and, as gravity quickly took charge of his body, he fell, again face-planted into the dirt. He bolted up from the frozen dirt. "Damn it!"

As he brushed off his clothing, he found himself standing back in the lab. The bells rang out, the scientists were again alarmed, but this time the troops merely strolled into the laboratory.

"How about we try something a bit different?" Tegra-Duran offered dryly.

"What do you have in mind?" Dart asked as his shoulders slumped. He hated failure.

The small probe that orbited the chunk of rock which Charger R/T inhabited had a camera, so the people back on Crest had witnessed all the events of Dart's landings. Tegra-Duran had long planned to catch Charger R/T and explained in detail to Dart what he had to do next.

Charger R/T was standing on the surface of the rock, amused by what was happening, and curious to see if Dart returned.

Dart did return, but this time, thanks to more accurate calculations, he materialized just feet behind his father. He landed at a run and, slamming into Charger R/T's back, activated the dark-blink. This time the scientists were calm, and no alarms rang. The troops stood by and watched

as Dart and Charger R/T materialized instantly. In a heartbeat, Charger R/T found himself standing in a confinement beam, presumably unable to move.

"Ha! I kicked your ass! How does that feel?" Dart was almost dancing with excitement.

No one but Tegra-Duran knew that from inside his containment field, Charger R/T was staring fiercely back at him. Like a rabid dog, Charger R/T swayed back and forth, intent on killing Tegra-Duran at the first opportunity.

Dart walked over to his father and said, "Now maybe you'll listen." To everyone's astonishment and panic, Charger calmly stepped out of the confinement field. Dart moved back quickly. Then, realizing the danger, he raised his hands, trying to keep his father from advancing on Tegra-Duran.

It was like a mosquito trying to hold back the windshield of a speeding car. Charger R/T advanced. "Wait, wait, hear me out, please. Dad, STOP!" Dart yelled.

Troops drew powerful weapons and, from every angle, Charger R/T found forces closing in on him. Dart was still pleading when Charger R/T stopped moving.

As if he were held in place, Charger R/T stood motionless. Maybe, still existing somewhere deep in his black pit of a heart, Henry was speaking, the young man who had willingly given up everything to help humanity.

Dart faced Charger R/T again. "I know we've all had some part in tormenting you. I know you feel, and justifiably so, betrayed and abused. I know the wrongs committed against you have forced you to endure ridicule and hatred. But now, more than ever, humanity needs your help. You were created to protect us. You are humanity's greatest achievement and most dismal failure. We abandoned our troops and left you and your kind out in the cold. Nothing we can do now or in the future will ever make up for the evil we inflicted. But please, we need your help now." Dart stopped and stood before the mountain in silence.

Bethillian approached Charger R/T, much to the alarm of her father, Tegra-Duran. Young and thin with mouse-brown hair and large green eyes, Bethillian was a natural girl who hated wearing shoes and never needed makeup to look pretty. She padded up to Charger R/T barefoot and politely said, "Please help us. My father will not hurt you, I promise."

As she spoke, she pointed to Tegra-Duran. His blood ran cold as he stood frozen, terrified because Charger R/T now stood within inches of his daughter. For his part, Charger R/T slowly looked down at Bethillian, then up at Tegra-Duran. His four fangs showed as he started to smile. Bethillian smiled back, thinking there was kindness in those blank white eyes.

His great hand reached out and grabbed her by the throat, yanking her from the floor, where she dangled, helpless and gasping. With a flick, Charger R/T snapped her neck, and Bethillian hung lifeless.

Charger R/T looked hard at Tegra-Duran as shouts and action erupted in the room, but before anyone could act, Charger R/T placed Bethillian back on her feet. Touching the center of her forehead with the finger of his other hand, he sparked her back to life. Bethillian burst from Charger R/T's grip and ran to her father, unharmed. Everyone there now understood the true nature and power of this beast.

"What do you need?" Charger R/T growled.

The only one with courage to speak was Dart. "Abarth has raised an army. He is at Earth's door and has killed millions already. He threatens to kill millions more and we don't have the power to stop him."

No one in the room wanted to move for fear of becoming a victim. Charger R/T's massive head scanned the room, seeing fear in every eye he encountered. He then blinked and was gone.

No one was sure what had just happened or could guess what would happen. Was Charger R/T helping? People started moving again, clicking buttons, and sending signals, hoping to find information on Charger R/T's location. Reports came flooding in from the news media. The beast was now being reported as appearing on Earth, then New Eden, also Mars and Ceres, and he seemed to be searching for something.

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Abarth was receiving these same reports. Calm in the face of this new development, he ordered his elite troops back to the world ship in anticipation of a fight. With the Grays at his back, and the neutrino weapon under his hand, he was bound to win.

## Chapter 13 A timely escape

Abarth looked out the viewing portal of the command center onboard the world ship, expecting to see the usual blackness of space sparkling with a plethora of stars. He was stunned to see, instead, a Tasker mining ship hanging just feet from the surface of the world ship, blocking the portal and its view.

The power that Charger R/T commanded was stunning; he had blinked himself and the Tasker ship through space to confront Abarth. And, by his will alone, the Tasker ship was defying the powerful gravity of the world ship itself.

Abarth slowly backed away from the portal and stumbled into the middle of the command center, trying to get away from what he saw. Facing him was a Tasker ship window where Charger R/T stood, looking back at him.

"Attack! Attack that ship!" Abarth commanded as he shoved a crew member out of his way, hoping the Gray mutants would respond and kill Charger R/T. "Focus the lasers on that ship and fire!"

Abarth, in a panic, continued barking orders. He was unnerved by Charger R/T's sudden appearance. He raced to the control panel of the neutrino weapon. Desperate to divert attention from himself, he repeatedly pressed the button that fired the weapon down to the surface of the four planets, hoping to kill something. Anything.

Spyder hid. He was all in favor of Charger R/T killing Abarth. That would leave the way open for him to take over the church. Millions of humans had been destroyed but millions remained. That power base would provide him with everything he wanted.

The neutrino weapon was a sickening device and its use had finally driven Jet to madness. As Abarth continued using it, Jet sank deeper into insanity. Rocking back and forth, with his hands over his ears and sobbing incessantly, he watched as Abarth continued shouting orders and blasting away at the four worlds. He could picture the blast hitting a human, instantly evaporating all the water in the body, and leaving just the base materials as a pile of dust on the ground. Women, children, the elderly and infirm, young, strong men and women, all suffering because of what he had created and Abarth now used.

From the world ship the Gray mutants erupted like packs of rabid dogs, all vying to be the first to attack the Tasker ship. Though they swarmed the surface, the metallic constructs of the ship seemed undisturbed by the onslaught, clicking and buzzing as their machinery slowly spun into action. A concentrated blast of particle fire burst forth, cutting down the attacking Grays, as row after row of Tasker guns fired their lethal charges.

Abarth was desperately recalling his remaining troops from the four worlds, trying to increase his attack power. "Damn it, Jet, get the hell off the floor and go to the engine room, we need to prepare for the beast!"

"I can't," Jet stammered. Urine stained the front of his pants.

"We will die if you don't move! Get to the engine room. Everything will be okay if we just stick to the plan," Abarth shouted over the continuous noise of laser fire.

Jet pulled himself together, then entered the elevator that would speed him across the planet to the main engine room, a place of massive size and complexity. From the elevator, he looked out the small windows and saw fields of crops, small cities and towns, all the places that dotted the inner horizons of this world ship. They were blackened now, after a year of the Gray Reptoid hybrids defiling everything. His elevator zipped past fouled lakes and rivers toward the artificial

sun the Taskers had long ago created for the people of Mahoud. Inside this beacon of light, which was the world ship's sun, was a tunnel that led to the engine room. Jet raced down the corridor to the entrance of the marvelous complex.

The engine room was radically different from all the technology humanity knew, for the quantum entanglement particle drive system was entirely Gray technology from long ago. Jet walked into a room foreign to humanity. Back engineered to be useable, the QEP drive was breathtaking in scale. Jet stood at the interface created by humans to use the drive and began activating the base programs Abarth had demanded he prepare.

"Are you ready yet?" Abarth shouted over the intercom system.

"Almost. Two more minutes and the system will be active," Jet shouted back. He could not keep his voice steady.

"Damn it!" Abarth snarled, then shouted for the Grays returning from the four worlds to join the assault on the Tasker ship. The sheer numbers of Gray mutations involved in the attack were beginning to take their toll on those small metallic soldiers, as several breaches in their defensive line began to widen. One by one, the Taskers were torn from their command posts and shredded, their limbs ripped violently from their bodies, their heads pulled off.

Charger R/T stood calmly in the Tasker command station, watching Abarth panic. The Taskers didn't concern him. They had spent their existence as mining robots in space and they were devoid of life, responding like puppets on a string. Charger R/T smiled at the frustration the Grays exhibited, their losses so great at the hands of their own ancestors' creations. To the very last Tasker, the little robots fought well, killing many Grays. When the last robot fell, the remaining Gray mutations turned their attention to reaching Charger R/T in the command post. They would soon learn they had made a bad mistake.

Charger R/T was like a spider in a web, drawing the Grays in. They crashed through the doorways, entering the command post, only to be held in place by Charger R/T's ability to control gravity. Charger R/T was growing impatient with the Grays and, instead of waiting, he began drawing them to him by bending gravity and pulling them into the ship. As hard as the Grays fought, they could not escape Charger R/T's pull, and the prospect of their deaths.

When Charger R/T felt he had enough of the Grays on board, he blinked from the Tasker ship and materialized in the world ship's command center. Then, with the power of his mind, he compressed the Tasker ship into a tiny speck, obliterating Abarth's army.

Abarth was stunned. Charger R/T stood now only a few meters from the central command console. Desperate, Abarth shouted, "All I have to do is hit this switch and, with the power of the QEP engines, I can use the neutrino weapon to blast the surface of all four worlds. If you surrender to me, demon, I will grant you the favor of not annihilating every human in existence."

Charger R/T took a step forward.

Abarth shouted, "I'm warning you; I will kill everyone, and it will be on your head. Is that what you want? You want everyone to die?"

Charger R/T stepped forward again, and those cold white eyes locked on Abarth.

"This is madness! I have the power to kill everyone and everything! Are you just stupid, beast? Is that it?" Abarth was coming unglued. He was certain the beast was programmed to protect humanity, yet it continued to approach. But if Charger R/T could not afford to let humanity die, he would be forced to comply.

The few surviving Grays rushed into the command center, desperate to attack Charger R/T and get revenge, but they stood no chance of success. Charger R/T caught them by their throats and snapped their necks, killing them instantly. Some he let hang by their throats for a few

minutes, as they scratched and clawed at his armor, but the end was always the same.

Abarth watched in horror as he began to realize his plan of controlling Charger R/T by threatening humanity was doomed to failure. He decided to take the worlds down with him. Time stopped for everyone in the galaxy as Abarth reached out to strike the neutrino weapon's trigger.

But, as Abarth reached for the button, Charger R/T slowed time down to a crawl. Then he sauntered the remaining few feet to Abarth. He yanked the man off the floor and thrust his great fist through Abarth's ribs, then released his hold on time. Abarth gasped as he realized he was hanging in the air with his chest broken open and Charger R/T's great face just inches from his.

As blood filled Abarth's mouth, he mumbled, "You win. I give in. Please don't kill me." Charger R/T twisted Abarth about in the air, peering into his eyes, looking for fear. Convinced he saw something, he tossed Abarth to the floor like trash, where he crumpled in pain and agony.

"Now!" Abarth shouted, blood spurting from his mouth. Jet had spooled up the engine of the world ship and, hearing Abarth give the command, he activated a controlled false jump directed at Charger R/T.

Jet had learned from the ship's records the method of a false-jump, with its ability to send out a wave of energy that, when in contact with an object, subjected it to the four-dimensional printers stationed in space. What Jet had done was create a modification of this discovery. He had devised a method of directing the wave like a beam and, directing that beam at Charger R/T, he false-jumped him off the ship.

Caught completely off guard, Charger R/T found himself tossed into deep space. When he stopped moving, he was in a rage. Roaring with anger, he blinked back to the world ship. But he arrived in empty space because, once he was off the ship, Jet had jumped the world ship to escape. The four worlds floated beneath Charger R/T's feet, circling the yellow sun of his childhood, safe from destruction.

Charger R/T's mind reached out into the vacuum of space searching for Abarth but, as long as the world ship remained in transit, he could not find it. He was infuriated with this outcome and rage filled his twisted mind with hate.

In that single moment, Charger R/T reached out with his mind to find all the Grays still in existence and, with his god-like power, tore the life from every one of them. No matter whether they were children, elderly, or simple farmers in an agrarian society, Charger R/T reached across the void of space and found them. Wherever they were, he stripped them of existence.

Humanity would never forgive Charger R/T for this unjustified reaction.

Charger R/T didn't care. The world ship had stopped moving now and he knew where it was.

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Abarth needed an escape. He had failed to kill Charger R/T during the human war, the Grays' invasion, and his involvement with the black sphere. All his attempts to get revenge against humanity and, more importantly, Charger R/T, had ended in disaster. Now Abarth knew his time was up. There was only one thing he could do, with Charger R/T hunting him, something so radical and dangerous that failure in this would surely result in his death. But the way things were, he had nothing to lose.

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### **DART SPEAKS TO READER:**

How can Abarth possibly escape? Time travel, Reader. I promised you a while back that I'd tell you how it works.

Jet had a precise, scientific mind and he understood what every human had so far failed to grasp, that the Grays' QEP drive engine was beyond brilliant. What the Grays had achieved in the design and build of the QEP engine was outside the range of all but Jet's ability to understand fully. To lock onto a quantum entangled particle somewhere in space and then transmit data to that particle in a binary method was by itself mind-boggling. However, to then use that locked particle to generate a four-dimensional printer out of the mass floating in the vacuum of space was revolutionary.

The next step was beyond revolutionary: the use of this found mass to clone and create new mass at will, using the incalculable powers of a layer of dark space. With the entire universe remaining in a perfect state of balance, the Grays could destroy matter in one location and recreate it in another location in the barest flicker of a second. This, Jet realized, was just the tip of the iceberg. What he was now using had once been spoken of in café back rooms and darkened corners of university campuses all over the world in the late twentieth century on Earth.

Have humans always been interested in time travel? Oh yes, they are always fascinated by the impossible.

Mathematicians and physicists had, in humanity's past, proposed the existence of a quantum locked particle, but one radically different from Einstein's quantum entangled particle. This was theorized as a single atom that existed for the entirety of time. It had been at the big bang event and would still exist at the end of the universe, an atom that never moved from its location, a quantum locked particle. It served a purpose of such importance to the dimension of time that it was almost overlooked, except by one professor. He submitted a paper never fully published in academia because of its unprovable contents and its implications for the nature of time itself. What this professor theorized was that in such events as a black hole, time itself could not escape the gravitational pull, so therefore, like water down a drain, time itself should eventually be drained from the universe.

The idea that time was a finite thing like mass was discounted. But Jet knew this professor was correct. He had discovered this old theory while in prison and, with the knowledge, a radical thought formed. Could he somehow lock the QEP engine to a locked particle in space? Then, with a controlled false-jump, send a traveler to any point in time to that location in space where the locked particle existed? To Jet's astonishment, he soon discovered that a locked particle was not a rare occurrence. They were everywhere, though so minute in size as to be almost undetectable.

In his first attempt, Jet sent a small red ball ten minutes back in time with the QEP drive by locking onto a particle in the room of the drive engine. Before he could activate the controlled false-jump on the red ball, it instantly appeared in the same location as the one he was sending. With this failure, Jet moved the red ball to a location across the room and retried. He was stunned to witness the ball appear in the location of the particle before he actually sent it.

He remembered what had happened in his lab six months before this first test with the red ball. A small blue cup appeared in his path from nowhere. He thought it was odd, but couldn't dismiss the idea that he might have been overtired and merely hallucinating. A few days later another blue cup appeared in his path in the lab. This time he decided somebody was playing a prank on him and dismissed it. But over the next six months, small blue cups kept appearing. In the first test he conducted, he had used one of the many blue cups kicking around.

It took him a while to clue in that time travel was actually working. He put a note to himself in one of the cups and a lab assistant remembered seeing the cup with the note in it a few months previously. They retrieved the cup from a cupboard and there was the evidence – the cup and note had traveled back in time. It was like the chicken and egg enigma.

You want to travel through time, too, Reader? But you are traveling through time already, at the normal rate and toward the future. Well, all right, we might have time to experiment with traveling back in time. But not until I finish my story.



Jet had achieved time travel, but it was a one-way trip. He had explained to Abarth and Spyder a few days earlier how the system worked, but Spyder wasn't interested and Abarth was unable to fully understand.

"Okay, so imagine an ocean with its waves crashing on a beach. The waves can't just land on the beach and stay there. If they did, the ocean would eventually run out of water." Jet was explaining this on the bridge of the badly damaged control center of the world ship. They were in hiding from Charger R/T, so far as it was possible to hide a small planet. "The only way that the water can return to the ocean is through the rip tides, like rivers underwater."

"Okay, I understand that part," Abarth replied coolly. He always hated it when Jet talked science. He felt stupid and small, no matter how much Jet tried to accommodate him. "But how does this have anything to do with time travel?" Abarth had bandaged his broken ribs again. They were healing well. The longevity program developed by medical science saw to that.

"Well, like the ocean, if a black hole absorbed time, then the universe would run out of it. So, like a rip tide, time has to travel backward to refill the ocean of space." Jet was explaining as he demonstrated this principle with small bolts he was placing on the table. "Here is a pile of bolts next to this cup. If the cup were a black hole, the bolts would just continue to fill the cup. Eventually we would run out of bolts." Jet filled the cup with bolts. "So, imagine small, locked particles in space. These are like anchors for time particles to grab onto. They are far enough away from the black hole for the time particles to grasp."

As Jet dumbed the conversation down to mere bolts and cups, Abarth slowly began to understand.

"This is what I like to call a time rip," Jet said as he removed the bolts from the cup and placed the cup some distance away next to a bolt that represented a locked particle. "In theory, we can escape back in time to before all this started."

Abarth really liked this plan, but Jet added a caveat. "But you have to understand that it's a one-way trip, because no QEP engine will be found where you end up, so there is no way to leave the timeline where you land."

Abarth looked at Jet and said, "What?" He truly had no idea what Jet had just said. His dedication to faking a spiritual life and searching for power left no room in his imagination for scientific mysteries. To Abarth, all this science was just mumbo jumbo.

"If we go back in time, we're stuck there," Jet said.

Abarth had no intentions of it being 'we.' He didn't need science or Jet anymore and, at the first opportunity, he would put an end to this relationship.

Jet was not a fool. He suspected that Abarth might have other designs. He had been duped into complying with Abarth's madness long enough and so made preparations to ensure his own safety. He had guessed that Abarth would attack him on the pressure point that would kill him.

This ancient martial art method of killing could only be defeated with a block. Jet knew he didn't possess the physical ability to stop Abarth's use of this hit, but he could use padding in his clothing to protect himself.

Spyder sensed that Abarth planned to kill him, too, and he didn't intend to stick around to find out if he had guessed right. When the opportunity presented itself, he blinked to Ceres.

Abarth didn't bother following him. The man had been helpful with the Grays, but otherwise he seemed rather inept. He might kill a few more humans on his own, but he'd never have the kind of power Abarth had wielded. And would wield again, when he came back from this trip into the past. No matter what Jet claimed, he'd find a way to come back.



Jet lay face down on the floor. With his one remaining good eye, he could see that his right arm was torn and bleeding badly right in front of his face. There was no feeling in his left arm, and he had no idea where it was in relation to his body. He also had no feeling in his legs. He'd probably been paralyzed by Abarth's attack.

Jet remained motionless, intently listening for Abarth's footfalls but hearing only the sound of his own rough breathing. He had no idea if Abarth had already left the engine room, which would mean he was safe now, or if the man was watching him from a distance, waiting in cruel anticipation of Jet displaying some sign of life. Minutes felt like hours as Jet watched the blood pulse from his arm and pool on the floor beside him. Like thick red paint, it flowed over itself like magma. Then the pain struck, flashing in his brain with the power of a tidal wave. Inadvertently, he moaned, revealing that he was alive. If Abarth was nearby, his death was assured.

The attack did not come, and Jet began to wonder if he might survive. Taking a chance, he tried to look around the room. It was then that his one good eye gained focus on a large black boot just feet from his face. Jet strained to focus on the boot and, twisting his head, looked upward. Looking down on him was Charger R/T who, with the light emanating from behind, appeared to Jet as a large black mass.

"You look wrecked," Charger R/T said. With a laugh, he reached down and yanked Jet's broken body from the floor and dangled him in the air for a good look, twisting him about this way and that. "Yep, pretty fucked up. Does it hurt when I do this?" Charger R/T jammed his large fingers into Jet's ribs.

Jet winced at the pain but tried not to show it. After a minute, he could no longer tolerate it and cried out, "Yes it hurts! Stop! Please stop!"

Charger R/T twisted Jet like a rag doll, wondering why the man was still present. "So, where is that other waste of oxygen, your friend Abarth?" Charger R/T growled, as he yanked Jet's face close to his and focused those blank white eyes on him. He had no concern for the pain he was causing. Had he known Jet's story, Charger R/T might have taken pity on the guy. Maybe.

Because Charger R/T now had Jet dangling in mid-air, it was clear that the padding had failed to some degree. That Jet was still alive and had survived Abarth's deception was obvious, but that he would continue to survive was clearly in question. He was partially paralyzed from the strike and had limited mobility.

"I know where Abarth is but, better still, I know when he is," Jet said, as blood spilled from his lips to run down his chin. Charger R/T just looked at him with that blank stare, so Jet guessed Charger R/T didn't understand. "I can send you after Abarth, but we have to hurry. The systems

are beginning to corrupt, a side effect I never expected when I first sent something back in time. It seems a lock on a locked particle is a two-way street. If you lock on a particle, it also locks on you."

Charger R/T's right eyebrow rose as if to say, 'What?'

"That's right, he and I were supposed to go back in time together, but just as I activated the QEP drive to jump, he attacked me. As you can see by my predicament, I probably don't have long to live. So, if you want to get to Abarth, you're going to have to trust me."

Trust was something Charger R/T had little tolerance for. "How about I just kill you and piss on your dead body?" Charger R/T growled.

"What you fail to understand, my friend, is that time will catch up to us. Abarth has gone back in time and is probably changing events, which may change our existence here all too soon."

Charger R/T's schooling had not included studying theories about time, and he simply stared at Jet.

"If you want to kill Abarth, you have to do as I tell you," Jet tried.

Charger R/T just responded with, "But you just said he has gone back in time, so it's not my problem. He and the rest of you can go fuck yourselves!"

Jet then realized what he had to do, for Charger R/T would never willingly help. Jet had sent Abarth back in time, but he went without the benefits of science. Abarth had arrived on planet Crest without his longevity benefits and without support from science. He landed as a simple old man with only the tools of deception he still retained in his powerful mind. He was expert at using trickery, a tool employed by religion for thousands of years as the easiest method of deceiving the human mind.

Jet knew that if he could send Charger R/T back in time, there was every possibility he would arrive as he left, with those still uncharted god-like powers that mystified science. Jet made his move. "My death is assured. You can do me a favor and kill me now, or you can watch me die in agony." Jet sensed that this appealed to the beast, so he pressed on. "Please, I beg of you, don't put me down in that chair. Hanging from your arm relieves most of the pain I feel."

Charger R/T looked over at the chair, then looked back at Jet and smiled, revealing the four fangs. He tossed Jet like a bag of garbage at the chair.

Jet desperately strove to land upright. He hauled his body into place and rested his arms on the control panel. A few fake moans for effect, then he continued. "I think the end is near, I just want to call my wife and kids to tell them goodbye." Jet frantically reset the controls and locked onto Charger R/T's body.

As Charger R/T started to move toward him, Jet cried out. "Ah, the pain! I'm in agony. Please have a heart and kill me, I beg you."

Charger R/T stopped his advance and smiled at the possibility of witnessing the spectacular death of a human who had been responsible for so much death.

Jet continued to ham up his act with fake moans, fake cries, and a fake conversation with a wife as he desperately tried to restart the QEP drive.

Charger R/T was truly impressed as Jet spit up blood and sprayed it around the control panel.

Once Jet was certain that the control systems had a solid lock on Charger R/T, he spun up the drive system and turned to Charger R/T. "When you find Abarth, kill him. Don't wait around. Just do it."

Charger R/T gave Jet a puzzled look, then felt the jump system hit him square in the chest as

before. Unable to react or to stop, he was sent on a sporadic course. He had gone back through time.

The damage to Jet's QEP system was severe; programs that kept the processes stable were failing at an alarming rate. The impact of focusing onto a locked quantum particle transferred to every nearby locked particle along the path Abarth had taken. The effect was clear.

What took Abarth seconds of time to achieve took Charger R/T a year. He would arrive shortly after Abarth on planet Crest, but Charger R/T's travel was disorientated and disjointed, causing him to bounce in and out of random locations at random times.

## Chapter 14 Dwarves investigate giants

Two hundred years after the four worlds recovered from Abarth's attack and replenished their population, the residents decided life had become too easy, therefore boring. Diversions such as being a character from mythology became all the rage. The Martians voted for living as Elves on that desert-rich world. Earthers went retro, sort of steam punk. New Eden people became futuristic techs and called themselves Techno-creeps because their acquisition of knowledge was slow and careful. Ceres people took the body forms and lifestyle of Dwarves from mythology.

Another three hundred years passed and Brick, a Ceres Dwarf, decided to look into the history of Charger R/T. He'd been just a student during the war Abarth fomented between humanity and the beast known as Charger R/T. He was fascinated by this demonic aberration in humanity's history and spent hours in libraries reading scientific journals and trying to decipher the Charger R/T story. In old histories, he had been regarded by the people of New Eden as some type of demon, though others referred to him as a god.

One day, Brick chanced upon a dusty old manuscript jammed in the back of a jumbled drawer in a university room crowded with rows of shelves. The author was a woman named Deleray and her story was written more in the style of a myth than as solid scientific observation. One clue that her account might be mythology was that she referred to the beast as Charger, not Charger R/T. But she might have been the first human to actually see Charger R/T, and so he spent a long time trying to decipher the messages hidden beneath the obvious language on the pages. Deleray ended her story by saying that one morning she witnessed the beast explode in a great ball of fire as it stood before a giant oak at the edge of the forest.

This perplexed Brick immensely. How could Charger R/T have been destroyed by fire and still be present in the world today? It made no sense. Brick again read through every page Deleray had penned, studying the history of New Eden. It came as a shock to realize that Pennington, the famous religious woman who had gone missing and was later found buried in concrete in an old elevator shaft, was the great great granddaughter of Deleray. Then it was noted, as an afterthought which would have been very easy to miss if Brick hadn't been reading carefully, that Charger R/T's remains were still in humanity's possession. The people of Deleray's time had retrieved the remains and built a grand altar to their new god. Deleray herself had eventually become his first priest.

Early one morning Brick blinked to the world ship, where he intended to search for this altar to Charger R/T. The world ship, the black rogue planet that the people of Mahoud once occupied, had had many upgrades in its time. Humanity's possession of this small planet once called Neo Terra had led to several technological revolutions. Most of the cities occupied by the people of Mahoud had been destroyed by progress or by the depredations of the Gray hybrids Abarth had used to attack the four planets. But a small lake with foot bridges to a central island remained. History recorded that a statue once stood on the island, but that was no longer evident. This was where Brick decided to start his search.

It took months of research, asking questions of locals and poking about in old dig sites before he managed to decipher the words "Visha the immortal" written on the large, badly damaged rock that once held the statue. From there he traced the story back to a small village which had existed close to the lake but was now farmland.

Thinking there was nothing more to be found, Brick finally returned home, back to the city

of Kings Beard. Planet Ceres was a romantic and wonderful place to grow up in, where every street and building had the appearance of some place out of mythology. Love of mythology and history was what had inspired Brick to search for Charger's origins.

Brick had almost given up when he chanced upon a badly mauled book of uncertain origin in a local bookstore. What caught his eye was the word 'Deleray' on the cover. It was not a book written by Deleray, but a book about her. On the inside cover were the words, "The great god Haspha burst into flames under the still standing oak tree. Authored by Oppsy, brother of Deleray." Here, for the first time, Brick read stories written at the time of Deleray by someone who had known her. Most important, it told where the burned remains of Charger R/T were to be found. Brick was so excited that he blinked to the world ship without even bothering to pack clothes.

He appeared, looking like a beggar, in the clean, orderly streets of a small town just a few miles from where the main door of the old city complex had stood, the door behind the waterfall. He didn't know that he was standing on the ground where Deleray and Oppsy had grown up, only that the remains of Charger were said to be somewhere close by, just under the surface.

It took some doing to persuade the town's leaders to allow him limited digging of their roads, but he was sure that the book by Oppsy was fairly accurate. The trees and rocks were still visible as described by Oppsy, and the bend in the main road still remained, even if it had been paved over several times. Brick was certain he knew exactly where to dig, and when he gained permission, he employed the latest technology of the dwarves. Long past the need for shovels to move the soil, they now employed a handheld device that used pressure waves to part the soil and create a hole.

Brick could hardly contain his excitement when the first 'clunk' echoed up from the hole he was digging. On his very first try, he had hit the stone lid of the box that held Charger's remains. Carefully he dusted the soil away and prepared to lift the lid. A few locals had gathered to witness the event. Anticipation was rewarded with disappointment. The box was empty. Although Brick had found Charger's sarcophagus, he did not know that the Taskoids had gotten there first. Long ago, they had taken Charger's remains because they needed his DNA to resurrect him as Charger R/T.

Brick was sorely disappointed, but his discovery did prove one thing. Charger had been killed at some time in the past, and this knowledge might be of value someday.



The Dwarves were an industrious people and found it natural to explore all the caves of Ceres. Della had just graduated from college, held an honors degree in anthropology and was considered by her professors as one of the best and brightest students to come along in several years. As a graduate student, she had discovered the crypt, an ancient room deep in the heart of a complex that housed the remains of many honored people of humanity's past. She now spent most of her free time lecturing on her findings, which was how she met Brick.

They hit it off almost immediately. Brick had just returned from searching for the remains of Charger, a quest most thought foolish, and was in attendance on a day Della was lecturing.

"There is so much about our early history that we still don't know," Brick said to Della as they sat together in a small café after Della's lecture had finished. "By Kings Beard, I am positive that my theory is correct! I believe that the beast known as Charger R/T existed in our past and that he was responsible for starting the first civilization on the world ship."

"Well, that is a radical thought, I would think. But you have to be certain that you're considering the ramifications of what you're thinking, I would think," Della said in the rambling way she used around people she really liked. Della was pudgy and short, had had few boyfriends and even fewer girlfriends, so she was a bit socially awkward.

"I see where you're going. Kings Beard! If I'm right, then the world we think we know is not the world we ought to know." Brick replied, almost as awkwardly. Several other patrons in the café noticed and smiled at the two young people, sensing that love hung in the air.

Della's communicator rang. It was her professor saying that he had discovered something of importance. "Where are you? I'll come to you," Della said. The professor was at the collection department, so Della and Brick both decided to go.

They blinked to the room and the professor welcomed them. He had found a small book among the relics in the crypt. It was the Book of Danny, which told Charger's history as well as that of the other Hyborgs and their part in the wars. Here, for the first time, was a written account of the time before time, and it was marvelous, full, and exact.

But the writer was not the Danny who had been world president; this was a descendant through the lineage of Suzie, a descendant three generations removed from President Danny Opinhimmer. This Danny had been named after his great grandfather and, if one could judge by his writing, was a cantankerous individual. He told of how the Hyborgs were created by men and how they fought for humanity; he told how humanity eventually treated them badly, driving them out of existence, all but one.

Charger was one of the first Hyborgs and he was also the last. Here was proof that humanity owed its existence to Charger, but he was not the Charger they knew now as Charger R/T.

The findings were hotly debated for years as Brick and Della stood alone facing a tide of disbelievers. People simply would not accept that they owed their existence to such a creature. When the threat of an attack by the giants of Crenel loomed, Brick and Della tried in vain to make the Elves, Dwarves and Techno-creeps, along with the steam punk Earthers, understand that when the giants attacked, and it was certain they would, the only way of stopping the chaos which Spyder was fomenting would be through Charger R/T.

They needed to prepare now. They had to create a Reader, someone above humanity, someone capable of taking humanity and its history into the future, and hiding it somewhere safe.



"By the gods of the underworld, I hate visiting these Martians! They always act so smug and superior," Della grumbled as she packed her belongings for another trip to Mars. Della was a member of the Red Dwarf clan, who regarded the Elves of Mars as enemies. "And it makes no sense why someone would take the Elf body form when the Dwarf form is so much easier to keep clean."

"Now then," Della's boyfriend, Brick, replied in a teasing manner, "if everyone looked as good as you, I'd have a hell of a time keeping faithful." Brick laughed at his own comment and Della tossed a bowl of berries toward his head, just missing it.

"Bottlehead, you better keep your eyes down around those Elf girls. Catch you gawking and I'll pluck them out."

"Your fingers are too chubby to fit inside my eye sockets." Brick laughed again, as he headed for the bedroom.

After more playful banter between the two lovers, they finally had their belongings packed and were ready to leave for planet Mars. Travel to that planet was a simple blink rather than real long-distance travel.

When they arrived, wearing their hobo-style clothing and with bags at their sides, the looks of revulsion they received from the Elves reinforced Della's opinion of their smug superiority.

Della scowled but Brick ignored the looks. The two were considered by most Dwarves as the finest and most learned anthropologists Ceres had to offer. The event they were attending had most of the Elf community upset, for the Elven study of the Crenels had produced little useful information.



#### **DART SPEAKS TO READER:**

Crenels? Didn't I say? Sorry, I'm getting ahead of myself. But we really don't have much time. The giants are on their way, and you must know the rest of the story before you fly to safety.

The Crenels are a race of giants who live on a super-massive world. Planet Crenel is three times the size of Jupiter, with a surface which is sometimes liquid and sometimes atmospheric, an exceptionally powerful gravity, and a population of billions. These giants spend most of their five-hundred-year life spans swimming, flying, or walking around the surface of their planet, depending on whether their world is covered with liquid or air.

Yes, they do look kind of weird.

They're advanced technologically in that they have housing, practice farming, and understand sophisticated mathematics. The sun their planet orbits can barely be seen by the naked eye. It radiates light waves in the infrared, so that everyone on the planet feels heat and warmth, but they live in perpetual semi-darkness. Unfortunately, they're also a race bred to brutality and conquest.

You want to know if you're the Reader that Brick and Della were talking about? Of course! Now you understand why you have to know the history of mankind.

I have no idea where you're going. That will be up to Charger R/T.



A multi-discipline group of Elves and Techno-creeps from New Eden had spent two years studying the inhabitants of Crenel. Now these two great races of humanity turned to the Dwarves for help in understanding the subterranean nature of the giants.

They had learned that homes of the Crenel giants were huge caves in mountains. These caves had been created by living beings, however, not by geological action. Billions of giants lived in billions of mountain caves arranged in rows like the houses in cities of Earth before the Night of the Black Rain wiped them all out. No natural process could produce caves like that, and at no time did the researchers ever witness the inhabitants creating a home. There was plenty of research for Brick and Della to examine, and it was hoped that these two could shed some light on the processes involved.

"Kings Beard, it's a bit of a puzzle," Brick whispered to Della as scientists from the different worlds debated in the auditorium. "Seems to me they only asked us to help because they think we live underground!"

"I tend to agree," Della whispered back. "Maybe the fools think we are trolls."

Dwarves were not known for quiet whispers. "You have something to add?" a tall, stern Elf named Shale asked. He was the conference chairperson, perturbed by the perceived rudeness of the Dwarf couple.

"We were just discussing why you would assume that we know anything about mountain caves!" snapped Della, never one to back down from a fight.

"Kings Beard! What my wife means to ask," Brick quickly interjected, trying to stave off a fight with the Elves, "is why you think we would be able to resolve this issue. We Dwarves have not lived in caves for hundreds of years."

"But your ancestors were the only humans so primitive that they actually did live in caves!" a snide Techno-creep from New Eden blurted. Smothered snickering followed.

"That may be true, but at least we don't live with our heads up our asses!" retorted a red-faced Della.

Yells erupted from all over the room. A man in the crowd rose, held up his hand for silence, and spoke. He was tall and thin, almost cadaverous, with piercing black eyes and long gray hair. He wore a black cloak, and his name was Dart.

"I was a member of the team that lived on Crenel and adapted our appearance to interact with these giants," Dart said softly. "The construction of their homes is an important topic. We need to understand the science behind their ability to create things apparently from nothing."

Dart continued without interruption. "We on New Eden have long understood the properties of the new elements discovered in the universe, and of supersymmetry, and we have been able to build everything we have now with that knowledge. But to find a species of intelligent life forms with the ability to create as we do, yet with no understanding of the elements of our universe or of supersymmetry, is difficult to comprehend."

There was muttering from the crowd. Killing one another had long since become something humans didn't do, but many at the meeting thought killing this mistake of an individual could be forgiven. Dart was the child of Charger R/T and Reanna, a couple considered by most as an amalgamation from hell. The only human more despised was Abarth, but he had disappeared at about the same time Charger R/T wiped out the Grays.

At the time of Dart's birth, humanity had just started learning the processes of elements in the periodic table. Where the periodic table once stopped at element 118, the new periodic table now stopped at element 435. With new eyes, humanity had taken its first real look into supersymmetry and at the hidden realm of the universe. The progression toward immortality was the next logical step. The technological creep toward humans with god-like powers was moving steadily.

"Kings Beard, we will need time to explore and understand the processes in place with these beings. I don't think we can give an answer right away." Brick was trying to refocus the gathering.

At this stage of their evolution, humanity could join in a simple hive-like mind when necessary. Which is to say that all humans could, in a sense, know what all the other humans knew. So stating that time was needed to study a problem was rare, for knowledge was now a gift now that all humans shared. Unhappy with the thought of having to wait for answers, the convention group reluctantly broke up its meeting for the time being.

"Hey, bottlehead, have I mentioned how much I hate Martians?" Della griped to Brick as they went out of the room with more information than they felt like dealing with.

Brick was about to respond when Dart approached and asked, "Can I help?"

"I don't know!" Della exploded. "Have your family members ever lived in caves?"

"I'm sorry, my wife is a little dismayed," Brick offered.

"It's all right, I've had worse things said to me and about me," Dart responded kindly. Dart had chosen the age of fifty for his appearance. He'd always liked fifty; it made him seem knowledgeable. In truth, he had lived a little over a thousand years. He could easily appear any age he wanted to be, but fifty suited him.

Every human alive knew who Dart was, and who his parents were. So he half expected to be rejected, as was the norm. He was pleasantly surprised, therefore, at Brick's acceptance. The three decided to wander down the street to a restaurant for a snack.

With a large cup of steeped tea in her hands, Della said to Dart, "So, you were there with these beastly Crenels. What can you tell us about their abilities?"

"They like their name to be pronounced 'Cree Nails,'" Dart offered politely. "In the two years my team interacted with these giants, we never witnessed them actually building or excavating anything. However, we did witness changes to their cities that simply seemed to arise out of nowhere."

"Kings Beard! Like magic?" Brick joked, trying to be funny.

"Well, yes, I guess that would best describe the process," Dart responded quietly. Over the years, he had grown to be gun-shy around people and his reserved way of speaking was mostly due to the abuse he suffered from those who judged him. He'd been over one hundred years old before he won the court battle to have his genetics modified, a record for the law courts at that time. It had taken some time before he was modified to conform to the way that other people were now created. But, because he was the child of two primitive humans, Dart was still often the target for jokes.

"We made a point of watching day and night, hoping to witness the process, but never had any luck," Dart said. "We couldn't just ask, because we were posing as them. They would question why their own kind could not understand the process."

"That makes sense," Brick replied as he shoved food into his mouth. For the Dwarves, eating with manners had become a lost art.

Della was munching on some cooked fish, with pieces of it escaping from her mouth onto the table. She blurted, "Well, it's obvious! There must be some unseen force, some mysterious creature that is looking after these giants."

"Kings Beard, that's a leap in thought!" Brick laughed. "What made you come to that conclusion? In the entire universe, we have never witnessed a master or supreme being providing in such a manner."

"Remember that black sphere years ago, the one that claimed it was our god of writing? If you remember, it claimed to be a provider for our early ancestors. Maybe these god things are common, maybe there's a group of gods and they take turns taking care of lesser beings." More food escaped Della's mouth and hit the table, causing Dart to slide his chair back from the table so as not to get hit.

"Maybe there is only one god, and it is everywhere, and it's ours," Brick said jokingly. "Better check under your bed tonight!"

"Della might be on to something," Dart put in quietly, hoping not to offend either Dwarf. "My father spent an eternity locked in a battle with a god-thing. He told me that the black sphere repeatedly tried to destroy and then recreate him. The black sphere did do that to the First Ones who were in the time-lock with him. It was trying to develop a following, and intended to first defeat and then control him. Which, obviously, it could not do."

"Wow, that's warped!" Brick stated, as if his comment had something valuable to add. Della gave him a stern look and he fell quiet.

"Gods be, if we assume there is a being capable of creating homes for the giants, then it falls to us to try and locate it." Della ran her chubby fingers through the remains of her food. She liked the feel of food on her fingers and loved shoving them in her mouth to suck on them afterward.

Brick finally asked, "Hey, whatever happened to that black sphere thing that said it was the god of writing?" No one had an answer.

With their task decided, the three joined their bodies together and, in a brilliant flash of light, blinked to Crenel, the planet of the giants. Still combined, they took the form of a giant and began their investigation. They had an idea of what to look for now and, within a few weeks, discovered another black sphere. This one lived deep beneath the surface of the massive world.

It now seemed obvious that the black sphere must be helping the Crenels, for the giants had icons which represented underworld beings. But this black sphere was very different from the one humanity had encountered long ago. The three hoped that their approach toward it had gone unnoticed, but it radiated a strong feeling of revulsion toward them. They got just barely close enough to observe it. However, feeling threatened, it lashed out with a field of hatred and anger, hoping to ensnare the threesome. They retreated quickly and blinked back to Mars with their findings.

"See, I was right!" snapped a tall Elf at the ensuing conference, hoping to stick a finger in Della's eye. "Get a Dwarf, I said. They understand caves, I said." Feeling vindicated, this Elf went on for some time before order was restored to the conference.

"Gods be, did I mention how much I hate Martians?" Della added, as if this were the first time she had ever said such a thing. Brick just rolled his eyes.

Dart tried to explain their findings to the reconvened conference, but his description of the threat this new black sphere presented had little impact on the audience. Humanity had grown powerful and arrogant, and so feared little.

"This black sphere clearly has an immense influence on the Crenels. I hate to think what might happen if these giants were pushed toward hatred," Dart said, though the gathering seemed intent on ignoring his findings. "We cannot afford to underestimate what such hatred might lead to. Imagine an army of giants backed by a power that could destroy anything which tried to oppose them!"

The conference adjourned as unsettled as when it started, leaving Dart disillusioned. "I don't understand how they can just ignore our findings," Dart said to no one in particular as he walked slowly away from the podium where he had just given his speech. He knew that the threat he'd outlined was clear enough for anyone to understand.

"The giants have the power of creation but a limited understanding of the process, and if we know this then surely, since the minds of humanity are linked, Spyder knows this as well," Dart continued to grumble.

It had only been five hundred years since humanity endured the attacks of Abarth and the Grays. Dart said, "Everyone knows Abarth was solely responsible for the Grays' attack on us, just as everyone knows that Spyder then declared himself heir to Abarth's power. And we know Spyder spends much of his time on Crenel. How can everyone ignore that?"

Brick just shrugged his broad shoulders and continued to walk next to Dart as the small group left the conference room.

"Let's eat!" Della led the way toward the restaurant they'd visited before.

As the three sat and munched, Brick asked, "So, your worry is that Spyder seeks revenge

against humanity for Abarth's disappearance?"

"Or else he's aiming to be as powerful as Abarth was," Dart responded.

"You could be right." Brick and Della both sighed.

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Spyder had ample knowledge of the giants and their demigod black sphere. While Dart, Brick and Della ate at the cafeteria, far off in space on Crenel, Spyder was standing before the god.

"It is true we once worshiped you. A tribe of desert-dwelling people called you our first and only god," Spyder yelled to the immovable black sphere deep inside the planet. It seemed to pay little attention, so Spyder decided to step up his game. "You were the old god, replaced by a kind and loving god, and that was wrong. You represented discipline and order to humanity, and you punished wrong-doers. In my church, Abarth killed our false prophet and now, as the new head of the ecclesiastical, I have restored your greatness to our people!" Spyder was calm in his simplistic deception of this omnipotent being.

The black sphere continued to ignore Spyder, so he stepped closer cautiously, almost sure that he need not fear death. "Please, I beseech you, great one, return with me to the home of these heretics, and together we can usher in your return to dominance and greatness." For a moment Spyder wondered if the sphere even knew of his presence.

A voice boomed from the black sphere. "You speak to me as if I were a fool, small one. What right do you have to be in my presence?"

Spyder jumped with alarm. "Please, great and mighty one, I only seek your assistance in destroying a vile and repulsive demon. The other god was tricked into defeat, but with my help and that of my church, we can destroy this Charger R/T. It is an abomination that has no right to exist!"

"I cannot be defeated!" the sphere boomed.

Spyder adjusted his tactics in seeking its cooperation. "That is true, great one. I was wrong when I spoke. Please forgive my foolishness. I only meant that the other being like you, which is still alive, was deceived by these heretics I speak of, and who need to be punished." Spyder decided that kneeling and praying might sway this being over to his side so, falling to his knees, he continued his deceptive speech.

"Please, almighty holy one, destroy this demon and show these humans that they should never have strayed from such a righteous path as the one you first set out." Spyder pleaded like a child begging for candy.

The sphere seemed unmoved. Spyder switched tactics again. "I understand now. You have a faithful following here and are worshiped. You probably have little time to spend on disciplining a cursed people so far away. I understand. For all I know, you might be trapped here in this dark and depressing underground. The other being like you still lives on New Eden, but is mostly ignored and shunned because it is weak and impotent. It even tries to negotiate with these heretics in hopes of swaying the masses to return to following its guidance." Spyder felt the ground beneath his feet shudder. Taking this as a sign he might be getting through, he pressed on.

"This god was trapped by humanity and held helpless by the demon Charger R/T that I spoke of. It even once appeared at Abarth's church. It gave a rousing speech of compassion and love. But in the end Abarth thanked it and sent it on its way. We are not seeking forgiveness for

what this demon has done, we want to find justice!"

The black sphere finally responded. "You are small and insignificant to us, and I know all of which you speak. We have already left our place in this universe and have long been traveling toward your planet. When we arrive, and that will be soon, we will place a pestilence upon the face of man. None of you will survive!"

"Thank you, oh mighty one, thank you! I look forward to the day you arrive to smite the demon Charger R/T..."

The black sphere boomed, "Enough!" An invisible force plucked Spyder from where he stood and flung him into the void of space. There he floated for some time, content in his deception and reveling in the joy of power. Eventually, however, he realized that he had no idea where he was. But he knew that he had pushed the right buttons, and had, in fact, poked a stick in the eye of this god. Retribution would soon befall humanity.

## Chapter 15 Attack of the black sphere

### DART SPEAKS TO READER:

You want to know why, when Abarth, Spyder, and Jet stole the world ship, it is at this very moment orbiting New Eden? Sorry, that's something else I forgot to tell you.

We found the world ship back about 4260, after Abarth and Charger R/T had disappeared. Spyder had vanished, too. Nobody was on the planet except for Jet and some Gray hybrids, all of them dead. We brought the planet home, cleaned it up, repaired it, and resettled it. A lot of work!

Nobody has seen Abarth or Charger since then. However, Spyder didn't stay hidden for long. He became the head of Abarth's church and took up where Abarth left off. He claimed that Abarth named him successor and he's wearing a pope's finery and making nearly as much ugly noise as Abarth did. The members of his church must believe him, though, because none of them are arguing.

Yeah, I agree. Pretty stupid. But that's humanity for you. They often don't want to face reality.



Hundreds of years ago, when Tegra-Duran was still prime minister of New Eden, he and the Prime Taskoid became friends. They had discussed many things, including the code that created the original Taskers and the strange code which eventually created them as Taskoids.

After Charger R/T and the black sphere, which claimed dominion over humans, had been confined in the time-lock together, and the Prime had disappeared, Tegra-Duran retired from politics and went into hiding until the furor about the black sphere died down. He had, like almost all the humans of New Eden, accepted the medical benefits of the longevity program. Now some twenty-two hundred years of age and still working part-time in a lab on planet Crest, he was spending the weekend quietly fishing on a private beach with a bucket of pan-sized trout beside him and armed guards nearby.

Tegra-Duran was content with life. His wife, Gerdra, still spoiled him. Their last two children, Bethillian and Delliam, who'd been created late in his life, were now more than five hundred years old, married, and happy in their careers. And Tegra himself enjoyed his job in the lab.

Gerdra approached with a small blinking device in her hands. "Dear, this thing that's cluttered up your office desk for so long is making a racket in the house. Can't you throw the damn thing away?"

A chill ran down Tegra's spine; he knew what the signal meant. "Give the device to me. I will handle this." Tegra-Duran took the instrument from her and offered a kiss. She willingly accepted.

Tegra said to one of the security guards, "Get the transport, I need to go to the prime minister's office now." The guard snapped into action as Tegra explained to Gerdra that he must leave for a few hours and would call when he was ready to come home.

A short time later, Tegra walked up the familiar steps to the ministries building. The staff recognized him immediately and came to attention. They knew that if Tegra-Duran was returning, it must mean something momentous was about to happen.

The prime minister was not amused when Tegra explained why he was once again in the

building he had long ago vacated. She sat, stern and upright, bristling at the very notion that the great Tegra-Duran was demanding she relinquish authority to him.

"What you're asking is not going to happen," Prime Minister Chilton stated, as if the topic were not even open for debate.

"I understand the difficulty, but you have no authority to stop me," Tegra said, as he took from his pocket the small device that had always occupied his desk at home. It had stopped beeping earlier and now only occasionally chirped, as if it still needed attention. Tegra held the device up for Miss Chilton to see. He flicked a switch on the device and the action plan he'd long ago created started executing. "I'm sorry, but I have implemented a strategy decided on many, many years ago. You see, the Prime Taskoid somehow managed to reactivate a programming subroutine. How this could have been done, I have no idea. But it's happened, and now we humans have no option."

"You're making no sense, and your pocket computer does not give you the authority you say you need!" Prime Minister Chilton was calling for security to enter the room when Tegra's device suddenly went quiet.

"It's done." Tegra-Duran, the most hated and yet most loved leader that New Eden had ever known, stood up to leave. Turning back, he said, "The world ship's engines are spooling up, and soon the ship will leave, carrying the many people who live there. I suggest you start emergency procedures now if you want to save lives. If you won't relinquish power, you must take responsibility for the results of that decision. The imbalance our world is about to experience will certainly be catastrophic. You must realize that I have no choice, that this moment was decided long before either of us existed."

Security rushed into the room. Prime Minister Chilton was beside herself with rage, shouting for them to arrest Tegra. The security staff stood frozen, unable to comply, for they respected the authority of Tegra-Duran far more than anyone else in power.

Tegra's shoulders slumped as if he were losing the will to live and, rather than leaving, said to the prime minister, "Sit down and I will try to explain. It makes little difference now whether you know the truth or whether you don't." He took a deep breath and went on. "Years back, when we were returning from the Grays' home world and before he went on trial, the Prime and I had time to sit alone and talk. He told me of this single program written into the Taskoids' code, a snip of code radically different from the standard code used for Taskoids." Tegra had reseated himself. Miss Chilton, looking reluctant, waved the security guards away and sat down.

"You see, he found a data burst in the code. It took time to decipher, but finally we both understood the relevance of the code. It was not only the spark of life that gave the Taskoids sentient thought and the power of decision, but it was also a message in a bottle. The Prime had at first thought the code was written by members of the First Ones, for it was technologically beyond comprehension."

Tegra placed the device on the minister's desk. He continued explaining. "It was not written by the First Ones." This admission brought relief that the great burden he had been bearing for so long had now been shared.

"I remember reading the reports of that time period," Miss Chilton said. "If you were wrong about the First Ones, then who wrote the code?"

"Okay, let me try again. The code itself isn't what's important here; it was what the data burst told. The message in the bottle told us that a black sphere was coming, intending to destroy New Eden and all life dwelling here, but did not reveal when it would arrive. It also told us what we had to do to stop it from destroying all life." Tegra stopped talking for a bit, lost in the past.

"But that's impossible! What you're saying is that you had knowledge of the future?" Miss Chilton was starting to understand the relevance of this conversation.

"Not just of that one point, but of our future for some time to come," Tegra responded as he leaned back in his chair and ran his fingers through his gray hair. Miss Chilton looked as if she were going to speak, but Tegra cut her off. "The Prime knew this time would come, and so we planned together to change the future. I am sending the world ship off to a distant point in space. It must be done, so that the events about to happen will not be the destruction of all humanity, just some."

"Who wrote the data burst?" Miss Chilton finally asked.

"This is the second black sphere we have dealt with, but it is one that we humans have already met. It was the god of the Old Testament, the vengeful god, and it means to do us all harm," Tegra responded slowly.

Miss Chilton sat silent for a moment, looking down at her desk. She never liked feeling helpless and found the lack of control difficult to face. "Wait!" Miss Chilton said, as a thought struck her. "If you know the future, then why wait until now to launch the world ship? I mean, if you knew all this would happen, then why wait?"

"The Prime and I understood that the data burst told of a time to come, but it did not tell us the date. We could have had a thousand years or ten thousand years. As it happens, it was today. I had hoped to avoid the destruction I knew would be the result of this action."

A deep and insistent rumbling emanated from deep beneath the surface of the planet, building in intensity. As the world ship bolted from the sky, the planet it had found companionship with for so long began to erupt with earthquakes and volcanos. Tegra-Duran felt a deep sadness; the casualties would be staggering.



As it turned out, what seemed to be a miracle happened. Perhaps, with all the advancements in medical science and the determined, dedicated people of the genetics longevity program, the miracle should have been expected. But science, as always, dealt in facts, not in hopes.

Buildings crumbled and infrastructure disintegrated as tremendous floods engulfed lands, and torrential rains thundered down. The planet was being torn apart.

But people weren't dying.

At first, nobody realized what was happening, for the trauma of disasters all over the planet took precedence. But slowly, as the pace of destruction slowed, people started to notice there were no casualties.

A long time had passed since people were concerned about death. It wasn't a topic most tended to dwell on, anyway. But, as humanity consistently gained years of lifespan at the hands of the geneticists, death seemed further and further away. To be sure, there were casualties from the disaster but, as terrible as the trauma might be, their bodies simply continued living while the wounds healed.

Medical science was just as baffled as the layman, unsure of which process had succeeded in creating humans with apparent immortality. It certainly looked like immortality, for human bodies weren't aging and weren't decaying. Now, they appeared not to be dying.

The riotous explosion of emotion that followed the devastation caused by the black sphere made the chaos of that event look mild by comparison. The cities and towns of New Eden were in ruins. After five hundred years of peace and prosperity, people could not believe how their

lives had been disrupted.

On the other hand, this devastating event had proved that humans were immortal. Many had hoped for it, but no one had believed it could happen.

Young people were the most vulnerable to this heady knowledge and made a game of trying to kill themselves or each other. All over the planet, wild parties of teens played 'chicken,' desperately trying to top the stunts of their friends in ridiculous attempts to destroy one another. People learned that if they cut a limb off, it might be off for good, but they would continue to live. Madness gripped the planet in that first year, until humanity came to terms with this amazing new phenomenon.

People quickly realized that war must now be absolutely a thing of the past. What was the point of battering each other to pieces if nobody died?

Then came the downside. It had been coming for hundreds of years anyway, simply because people weren't dying. The government had already begun taking steps to counteract over-population. The results of the attack on New Eden by the black sphere spurred the enactment of new laws.

Pregnancy was no longer allowed. Children were genetically grown, styled to suit the needs of society and some few discriminating individuals. The children were allowed to age naturally through medical process to the age of eighteen, then they could choose to continue the drug regimen and age to whatever point they desired. Incredible advancements in every field, including sports and art, became the norm as humans with immense intellects were brought into the world.

## Chapter 16 Terrorist onslaught

### DART SPEAKS TO READER:

What do I do when I'm not telling you the history of humanity? Well, there are no people on Earth except you and me, so no party-time, either.

I've built a simple shelter nearby and, to begin my day, I venture out to see if it's still true that there are no humans around. There never are, but don't feel sad for me. I enjoy my own company. The sky is still a most delightful blue, and the sun still warms me.

Sometimes I blink to the shores of what was once known as western Canada, with its rocky outcrops and brisk air, its massive forests. Then I blink again and find myself standing in the great city of New York, where the wind off the sea whistles down the empty streets. I blink again and I'm sitting on a bench beside a peaceful lake.

Yes, I can go anywhere I choose by blinking there. No, I don't have the power to go back in time. That's just silly. Science has shown repeatedly that time is linear. That told us we had to stop messing things up because we have no back button. Yes, I know Charger R/T bounces around to different times, but that's him. He has powers nobody else has.

With nobody left on Earth except you and me, of course I will take care of you until it's time for you to leave. Besides, I couldn't walk away from Earth after all the hard work we did to make it a beautiful and thriving planet again. If the giants find this planet and wreck it, like the Grays did with the Night of the Black Rain, I just couldn't live with that.

You're right, it's an Eden. Humanity may not deserve to survive and, frankly, I don't think it does, but that's no reason to destroy a lovely fertile planet.

The other day, I blinked to an open field; it was covered with the most incredible yellow daisies and red poppies. The place seemed to need some birds to sing, so I created a few robins. Yes, I can do that, too.

Now I'll explain why everybody left.

Yes, you guessed right. You've been paying attention. The giants are on their way to this solar system, and they intend to completely obliterate humanity. Everyone is terrified.

You want to know more about the war with the black sphere? Let me try to condense the background into something that won't take much time.

You remember Abarth, and his belief that humanity had wronged him over the death of his wife and three daughters? Of course, he was a bit insane in the first place. Anyway, Abarth wanted to destroy the entire human race and tried to trick my dad into killing everyone.

When Charger R/T refused to help, Abarth stirred up trouble with those Grays I told you about. That got all the Grays killed and, with my dad on his tail, Abarth fled back through time. My dad finally tracked him to planet Crest and killed him.

That didn't solve the problem either. In the other timeline, when Abarth was in prison, he met a guy called Spyder, who became his disciple and who is causing nearly as much trouble as Abarth ever did.

What does Spyder want? What do people like him ever want? Power. And then more power.

So Spyder went to the black sphere which rules Crenel, the planet of the giants, and coaxed it to attack New Eden. It caused immense damage with earthquakes, storms, volcanos, and floods, which destroyed almost every building. But no humans died.

Yes, that's when we found out we really are immortal. But the black sphere was enraged when it realized it hadn't succeeded in wiping out humanity. Then it decided to send out packs of

giants on suicide missions.

Absolutely correct, Reader. Gods are vengeful.

Right now, as I speak, an army of giants is on its way to Earth, and they will very likely find and kill me. But not you. You have a task.

Charger R/T will dispatch the giants soon. I know that because he told me it happened in his past. Just trust me, it will all make sense someday.

Now let me tell you about the problem I face. We want to give you Earth and all the information you will ever need about the human race. We want you to have the history and what we've discovered through our science, and most important, the real reason we keep turning to religion.

I will send you and Earth on a trip across the great void of space and have you holed up in a place so remote that no one will ever find you. That's right, now you get it, you're our message in a bottle, Reader. You will make sure that humanity survives once again and thrives, but only because of a gift I'll give you. That gift means you will be humanity's best hope for a future.

We pooled our talents and created for you the most powerful weapon ever conceived. Don't be too quick to accept this gift, for it comes with a weighty responsibility. If you accept it, you will be the most powerful being in existence, and that's saying a lot. You won't at first understand the gift, but the more I explain, the better you will realize the awesome responsibility you bear.

Simply put, you will have the power to read minds and to change them.

If an army attacks, you can send them home by changing their minds, or if an evil entity attacks you, no matter its biology, you can send it away by changing its mind. This means you could control governments, or entire planets and their destiny. You could even control the entire universe and have it bend to your will, simply by changing the mind of any being so that it will do what you want. Without killing a single living thing, you can decide what everyone will do and how they will do it. So I hope you see, Reader, the incredible responsibility you would have.

The unanswered question is this: what gives you the right to decide for others their destiny? Think hard about that one.

No, you cannot save me by using this gift to send the giants back home. Sad to say, it will take some time before you fully control this talent. I will probably be dead by the time you master it and, besides, you can only change the future, not the past, Reader.

What about all the people who ran away? It's not their fault that they ran away. You see, Reader, as we humans discovered more of how the universe really functions and what it is made of, we grew less and less reliant on violence to solve our problems.

People no longer had to fight for food, and they never needed money because it was easy to make enough things for everyone. Work became almost a thing of the past since we were free to develop and explore as we chose. We stayed active with learning, creating, doing the impossible, and destroying the things that stopped progress. Oh, yes, we still destroyed, because that's part of our nature, but we never killed.

Destroyed what? Organized religion for one. Politics for another.

We had no use for the problems that had once kept us down, things like debt, hatred, envy, greed. The list of things we put behind us was long, but the one thing that we should have kept was our willingness to fight. In this regard, I think Abarth was right; we became sheep, too willing to rely on science to resolve everything. Sometimes a problem just needs a good punch in the face to resolve it, and this is probably what we should have done with the giants.

You're still confused about the giants? As I said, they're coming to Earth and the other three planets, planning to destroy every human. Charger R/T has told me this is what will happen. He

says he can't stop the giants from coming, but when they get here, he will destroy all of them.

Ah, you think he is like us, and I just told you we don't kill anymore. So you're confused.

Well, Reader, be assured, Charger R/T is nothing like us. Charger R/T is the most malevolent and powerful being ever to exist. Humanity is sickened by my dad's existence, but still dependent on him for survival. In our long and checkered human history, my father stands out as the master of all that is repugnant and evil. He is the most abhorrent being ever to exist and ultimately responsible for an inconceivable number of deaths.

Now I must continue with the story.



A lone giant had been sent from the planet ruled by the black sphere on a singular quest. It completed its mission of landing in a crowded marketplace and detonating itself. The explosion was inward, an implosion. The effect was to erase supposedly immortal humans from existence by simply pulling all their mass into a singularity, then using that force to provide transport for the next giant on its holy quest.

Again, and yet again, the giants traveled alone on random, unpredictable courses to the four populated planets circling the sun. Their arrivals were only announced by the destruction and chaos they left behind. People had no protection, for they had long since abandoned a military force. Nor did they have the support of a police force, for crimes had become the acts of only the unintelligent and few of those remained.

Humans had become, as Abarth predicted, sheep. And the black sphere was Spyder's unthinking and willing accomplice. Spyder reveled in his power, and in the torment the followers of the black sphere god brought down upon the heads of the innocent. He often cited his insane justification, that only he was intelligent enough to rule the solar system.

The Elves, Dwarves and Earthers had been warned by Dart, Brick and Della, and now the Techno-creeps scrambled to find methods to plug up the leaks in their sinking lives. Then came the explosion of two giants at once. This was a new tactic, sweeping through humanity before it could find a way to defend itself. With twin explosions in separate locations, these giants carried out the wishes of their god.

Spyder found a safe hole deep underground to preach from and ranted to humanity through the news agencies. They willingly gave him plenty of coverage. Like the news media of old, they seemed to love giving voice to the insane. He made speeches from hiding, claiming the god's acts were just and righteous. The black sphere watched, from his own deep cave, the murderous acts against a people that once worshiped him.

Humanity was desperate to understand. People were willing to listen, but nothing of any intelligible logic came forth. People tried to reason, pointing out that the problem was not in accepting the giants as living beings with rights and privileges, but that their leader was the root of this hostility.

To the giants, this was intolerable. Their leader, their god, was perfect and pure. Their response to humanity was an increase in explosions, and so three targets, then four, became daily events. Thousands turned into tens of thousands before the Techno-creeps began to create a plan for the defense of the four worlds.



"What could possibly cause these noble creatures to behave so recklessly? Is it something in their diet?" Dart asked Brick and Della this question as the three sat at a café in the old town, their weekly discovery session to try and understand the horrific events. Their help had been enlisted as experts now that the attacks were having an impact. They had originally presented their findings to a council now seen as ineffective, so it fell to these three to try to determine what the black sphere wanted.

"All I know for sure is that the black sphere gave me the creeps," Della replied as she licked sweets from her fingers. She retrieved another candy from the dish on the table, shoved it in her mouth, then continued talking. "Dart, how are you doing with the Mind Reader program? Oh, and how about your father?"

Dart scowled. "My father told me he will arrive to help when the time is right, but what that means is anyone's guess. As for the Reader platform, I have most of what I need." He would be blinking back to Earth in an hour or so, to finish telling her the story of humanity.

"Gawd, I hope Charger R/T shows up soon," Della said.

Her tone bothered Brick. "If I didn't know better, I would think you turned groupie on Charger R/T," Brick said, obviously jealous. Both Brick and Della had dedicated their archaeological careers to studying Charger R/T in hopes of understanding the beast.

Della blushed and, looking Brick straight in the eyes, seductively slid another piece of candy in her mouth.

"Kings Beard, if we are going to survive this, we need to yak!" Brick said.

Della just grinned.

"Sometimes the two of you unnerve me," Dart said.

It had taken about a year to get the Reader project fully committed, a year of continuous harassment from the giants, a year of allowing Spyder, with the help of the media, to spout intolerable stupidity at a desperate people.

Some humans felt they could not wait. Fearful for their existence, they chose to blink off the planets. However, with no safe place on any planet, the system was enabled to blink them into open space. Out there, the internal devices continued to monitor heart rate, blood pressure, and telomeres but, with no relay stations available, there was no way to return. Out there, millions of humans floated in the black void, paying for their cowardice by being forever unable to act.

When the black sphere started its slow and deliberate movement toward the four occupied planets in the solar system, with an enormous army of demented, violent giants in tow, Charger R/T finally arrived.

Della, Brick and Dart greeted the beast on his arrival. Della was so excited she was unable to stop her tongue from tripping over itself. "Now that you're here, everything will be all right. I have been studying you my whole life, and I'm sure I know more about you than you know about yourself," Della said as Charger R/T gave her a cool glance. "Is your armor actually attached to your body? How do you go to the bathroom? Is it true you do not sleep?" Della appeared to be asking questions without stopping to breathe.

Her questions continued and Charger R/T got annoyed at having her constantly jumping in front of him. He dodged around Della for the last time, stopped and snapped, "Hey, five-foot-five, get out of my way!"

"Did you just call me by my height?" Della gasped. She turned to Brick and asked, "Did he just call me by my height?" Offended, Della burst into Charger R/T's path once again and blurted, "I have a name! Della Dalrak of the clan Gorthgarbelhak. That is Brick, of no importance, and that is Dart, your son!"

Brick just shook his head and kicked at a stone on the ground. Della was making a fool of herself, and he didn't know how to stop her. Della went on for some time describing the importance of her family clan, while Charger R/T stood unconcerned and paid little attention.

When Charger R/T had had enough, he simply blinked and appeared beyond Della, then proceeded to walk onward into the council chamber. Della was incensed.

His arrival in the grand council room was met with harsh whispers. He was clearly not welcome.

"Humanity's end is about to arrive. I will not stop this. You should all be running now!" was all Charger R/T said, then blinked from the room.

Della was heartbroken. She had hoped against all hope that she somehow possessed the magic needed to bridge the gap in reasoning between this beast and herself. But her delusion had been smashed.

Charger R/T had no interest in his past or in Della's opinion. He simply had a job to do, and he wanted it finished. Panic ensued as the news flashed out to the worlds that the one being that could put a stop to this was not interested in helping.

In the early history of humanity, when a tribal group threatened a small village, the local inhabitants would band together and fight. Now people tried to use reason to stop the giants and the black sphere from attacking, and an envoy was chosen. A representative of the people of the four worlds was sent on a diplomatic mission to try to reason with the oncoming horde. He blinked out to stand on the surface of a small dwarf planet at the edge of the solar system, hoping to negotiate a peace.

Shale was a tall, thin Elf, leader of the group that had approached Brick and Della, and head of the team which had studied the giants of Crenel. He was certain that he could persuade the black sphere to listen to reason. On a barren, gray, dusty surface, pockmarked with asteroid impacts, Shale waited for the army to approach his five-hundred-mile-wide platform of rock.

The black sphere noticed him and, curious, drew near to hover above Shale's head. The sphere was almost as large as the small dwarf planet where Shale stood, and its surface looked like dirty black engine oil from some antique wreck of an automobile out of ancient history.

As it began to speak, the slick, black surface appeared to twist and contort. "Who are you, and why do you not kneel before your god?" boomed a voice that had Shale's elven ears wincing with pain.

Shale was a proud man and a leader. He never responded well to being regarded as anything less than a superior being. "I offer you a chance to stop and find peace with us. I'm sure that we simply have not understood your perspective clearly," Shale said, speaking slowly. "If we have somehow offended you, please know we had no intention of doing so, and that we wish to apologize."

The black sphere hovered motionless above Shale's head, a mile or so above the surface. It was, at times, difficult to see the outline of the sphere against the blackness of space, but once in a while sunlight would catch the surface just right, making the immensity of the sphere apparent.

"If it will help, we are prepared to compensate you for the loss of the Crenel giants who attacked our people," Shale offered, hoping that a bribe would send this army on its way. When there was no response to Shale's offer, he tried a different tack.

"We know that one of our kind, a being named Spyder, has approached you. He is not our representative. He is considered by us an enemy of humanity." Still no response, so Shale pressed on. "But if he is a friend of yours, then we are clearly mistaken in our opinion of him, and would certainly apologize."

Several giants moved closer to Shale's position. They appeared twisted and insane, not like the giants Shale had lived among and studied. Their attitude was obviously the work of the black sphere. Shale decided to try communicating directly with these terrorists, hoping to break through to their former proud true nature. What had driven these once proud and noble creatures into such a perverse abomination would never be understood, for once their minds were set, they were immune to change.

"Please, you don't have to do this. We can still resolve our differences if only you will not continue this madness," Shale suggested to the nearest giant as it drew closer. "We have great technology and are willing to share it with you."

The giant continued its approach and as Shale began to realize the danger, he stepped back. "I promise that we will turn off our defensive shield and welcome you into our homes if you will just promise to stop these attacks on our people."

The entire encounter was captured on media and shown to the people remaining on the four worlds in real time, so that when the giant attacked and the implosion cleared away, the gasps of shock and the sobbing were universal. Crying turned to panic as more people sought to escape and blinked into cold space.

The black sphere was not interested in negotiations, nor in peace. With its limited intellectual capability, it was the vilest force the universe had ever known. It again resumed its course toward the four worlds orbiting their yellow sun, intent on either obliterating the humans or forcing them to be its slaves and servants. This emissary of hate and oppression seemed unstoppable.

Brick and Della, like the other people of Ceres, had been convinced for many years that this was what would eventually happen, and the Dwarves had expanded and fortified tunnels occupied by humans thousands of years before. These tunnels had withstood the Grays' attack, and they could survive the giants, so it was thought. The Dwarves were always careful to hide the entrances to the underground cities they built, leaving their surface dwellings simple and basic. This had ensured they were never discovered by the Grays, and they felt certain the giants would be equally fooled.

However, when Charger R/T eventually acted, the tunnels were of no use. The only planet to escape was Earth, with its precious cargo, the Reader.

## Chapter 17 Singularity

### DART SPEAKS TO READER:

Our time is nearly done, Reader. The army of giants will arrive in only a day or so, maybe less. Yes, you're the bait drawing them toward Earth. They can't wipe out humanity unless they wipe out you, too. You are much cleverer than we ever dreamed you would be. But don't be afraid; I've remained here on Earth to make sure you're safely sent to the destination we chose for you. And Charger R/T is standing at the gate.

What's the gate? Probably humanity's greatest engineering construct, the most enormous thing we've ever created. We took all the material from the Oort cloud, a ring of debris that circles the solar system, and objects from the Kuiper belt as well, and built a wall which orbits the four worlds circling our sun. We left only one entrance, and we call it the gate. That's where Charger R/T is now waiting.

Humans have been building fortifications for thousands of years and this is just an extension of that. This ring of space objects is really quite an impressive thing, and it's armed with our greatest technologies.

There's only one way in or out of our small solar system now, and that's through the gate. No, not a small garden-like gate. It's a massive opening, guarded by a being everyone should fear. And that's my father, Charger R/T.

What does the giants' army look like? You should be able to look into space and see it for yourself now, but I guess you need a bit more time to develop those skills. The army is, well, gigantic. It consists of beings that can move through the vacuum of space without technology. They're led by an entity that humanity truly fears, the black sphere. That sphere is something we faced thousands of years ago. It called itself our god back then, or so a tribe of desert dwellers wrote.

What is a god?

I don't even know where to begin in answering that. There are some who would consider you a god once you have fully developed. The best I can do to describe a god is to tell you what it isn't. Then whatever remains must be what it is.

A god is not magic, not like a trick, though it may be seen as such. A trick is something that can never endure. Though it may deceive for a little while, it's always eventually understood. Nor is a god all-powerful and perfect, though throughout history, many people have described their gods that way, but such an interpretation of a god cannot be proven.

What do I mean by that? Well, one god is described as creating a devil. What kind of perfect being would create a devil, something to torment and destroy its perfect creation, namely us?

Oh, yes, most people like to think of humanity as something special, as the epitome of creation, as if evolution has a specific goal instead of simply being a natural process.

But, if the god willingly created this devil, then it willingly created pain and suffering and torture. I ask you, what type of being could be so malevolent as to create something so vile and yet still claim to be a loving god?

A god is not intelligent, that's obvious. There are hundreds of references to the sheer stupidity of gods. Okay, here are a few examples. Apparently, gods are in favor of slavery, incest, and torture, all things we consider stupid at the very least and evil at the most. Gods have even chosen to appear to a people which couldn't read or write, when there were several other groups of people who did have the skills to record his words.

Gods are not kind. They show little compassion towards their flocks, though they claim to be loving. In one story, a god destroys the whole world. He murders every baby, child, woman, and man, regardless of their age, but spares a drunkard and his rather peculiar family.

Another god murdered several cities of humans just to save another old man and his promiscuous daughters, but not before murdering a wife for the crime of looking. This same god commanded the death of a son by its father and, when satisfied by the father's obedience, sent a lackey to stay the man's hand and spare the child, apparently giving no regard to the torment the child must have endured.

If I tried to kill you, would you want anything to do with me in the future? I thought not!

Gods don't believe in equality; this is obvious. There are no female heroes in any of the stories of gods, where women are considered mostly useless.

So, what is a god? Well, since gods are not fair, loving, intelligent, kind, learned, or even sane, they must be the opposite. Whatever you do in the future, don't be like a god.

Is Charger R/T a god? After giving that some thought, I would have to say yes. He is all-powerful and incredibly destructive since those that cross him have little chance of surviving. He wiped out the entire species of Grays, with no regard for either the morality or the consequences. He stands at the gate now, waiting to destroy another species of beings, hoping they will change their minds and not attack, but perfectly willing to kill them if they do. He can be at any place in space he chooses to be, without fear of what he might find there.

Most important, Charger R/T is our creation, as all gods have been. Humanity made him what he is, and we use him to our own ends. So yes, Charger R/T must be a god.

Am I a god? No, I refuse. I know that I am the son of Charger R/T, and that I share his blood, but I reject the powers I might have and choose to be simply a man.

Why? Wow, you are really in question mode! We have little time left and you have too many questions, Reader, but I will try to answer.

You see, I was born human. I had no gifts from my parents at first, so I grew up just being a kid. I had some friends, played games, laughed and joked, even fell in love once, just like any other kid, but I was different in one respect. At that time in history every kid was gifted with longevity, close to being immortal. I was easy to bruise, quick to bleed and cry, and no doubt I could easily have been killed. I was the first natural human in quite some time.

There were some crazy lunatics who followed me around for a while after I got older, claiming I was the son of a god, but I eventually shook them off with a neat ploy. I thought my demise was brilliant, really. I had just gained immortality but, before anyone knew about that, I faked my own death. They all thought I was still human, you see, and so when I died, they dispersed. There are some good stories that came out of that event. My face popped up on stones, cereal boxes, and all sorts of weird places for quite some time. Eventually the stories faded, and I was able to continue my life in peace.

I know, from observing my father, that it's impossible to have a peaceful life if you're a god. And I do like a peaceful life, so that's another good reason for my not wanting to be a god.

Then Abarth rediscovered my existence. That guy really made my life a living hell for years. I intended to tell you about some of my childhood adventures, but it seems the giants have arrived earlier than we expected. I will have to encase you now, Reader, and send you on your journey. We will never meet again, and I wish you well.



Dart stepped back from the young girl in the gilded box and blinked to a spot several miles away. Reader had been nine when Charger R/T found her. She was twelve now, and pregnant, ready to carry out her task. She had the entire knowledge of humanity and would be the mother of the species in the future.

He folded planet Earth into a gas shell that had the properties of indestructible metal, carefully ensuring the structure was fully complete in order to protect its precious cargo. He then pulled space in on itself, creating ripples that echoed across the universe. He twisted and folded gravity and mass, bending the universe to his will.

Suddenly, like a silver marble in a vast emptiness, Earth and the Reader, the future mother of humanity, were hurled across the immense black depths of the universe to another solar system far away.

All Dart could do now was wait in the blackness of space, hoping not to be seen by the approaching army. Then he decided to stand by his father in this time of crisis. But he would not fight.

A major question struck him. When science recreates the human condition, do the molecules of the mind survive death? If our memory is a combination of molecules during life, then do those molecules survive the death of the body or do they die with us? In recreating Charger as Charger R/T, science actually used the memories of the dead Charger. But could that happen with ordinary humans?

While Dart floated in space, wrestling with this question, he failed to notice Charger R/T approaching. A great hand reached out and grasped Dart's shoulder firmly. He looked up to face Charger R/T. Then, with no warning, his father sent him far out into deep space, well beyond the combat zone.



The advancing army expected Charger R/T to try holding the gate, to prevent them from entering the fortress, but this was not what he had in mind. Instead of stopping the army from entering the fortress, he stood aside and let them all come in. Now he turned around and prevented them from escaping.

The black sphere was angered by Charger R/T's trickery, and commanded vast legions of giants to attack and destroy him as the rest of the army began devouring life on the remaining three worlds, looking for the child.

To Spyder, lurking in the shadows just behind the black sphere, Charger R/T appeared at the gate as a brilliant, repeated flash of light, like a pulsar, as he annihilated millions of attacking giants with apparently little effort. The giants threw themselves at Charger R/T in a wild, desperate bid to force him to give ground, to leave the way open for their triumphant exit, but he remained unmoved. He even seemed to enjoy taking the lives of these once innocent creatures who were now controlled by the black sphere, now and then flashing a quick smile to reveal his trademark four vampire fangs.

The giants continued to fling themselves at Charger R/T en masse, sending mountains of their living flesh into the maw of a receptive beast. He devoured them all with glee. They were trapped and would never leave this place. As soon as only the black sphere remained, Charger R/T intended to finish this once and for all.

"I am not trapped in here with any of you!" Charger R/T roared. "You are all trapped in here with me!"

These giants, twisted monsters who had replaced the passive, peaceful giants, used no weapons but attacked only with their great height and weight. They attacked from the left, then the right, from above and below and, at every attempt, Charger R/T scattered their essence to the winds of space. It seemed impossible that a single being could prevent an entire desperate army from gaining an advantage, but Charger R/T never gave an inch.

When half the invading army was utterly destroyed, the black sphere finally decided it needed to intervene. "Who are you that you dare to stand and defy your God! Kneel or fear my wrath! Kneel!"

Charger R/T snorted, then motioned for the sphere to attack. But the black sphere was unwilling to confront him directly and so sent more legions of giants to distract and to draw Charger R/T's attention while it launched several smaller attacks from the rear. None gained any ground.

The black sphere erupted with rage at the failure of the giants and lashed out at them, whipping at them to fight harder. Charger R/T was amused by the frustration the sphere exuded and, when the opportunity arose, he sent a wave of energy directly at the sphere like a bolt of lightning, sending it tumbling backward in space.

The black sphere righted itself and spoke with less vigor and bluster, for it was beginning to find this demon a sizeable challenge. "Every living substance that I have made, I will destroy! I will start with you!"

Behind Charger R/T and outside the fortress, beyond the gate, a reserve army of giants waited in the blackness of space for their opportunity to fight. "Behold, thou art a dead man!" the sphere said, as it released the reserve to attack Charger R/T from behind. At the same time, it sent the whipped giants within the fortress headlong into the demon's grinning face.

Charger R/T was surprised by the tactic of the two attacking forces. He staggered and gave ground for the first time in the fight. For a moment, the black sphere thought that it might be winning, but from the depths of Charger R/T's black soul arose an anger so great, that when released, even nearby planets suffered. He lashed out with such violence that, for a moment, even space and time bent to his will. Drawing the giants into his fury, he crushed the life from every one of them.

The black sphere was insane with rage and frustration. It had never in all its existence confronted such a stubborn and unmovable force.

"Now shalt thou see what I can do to you, demon!" roared the black sphere, spitting vile hatred and anger directly at Charger R/T. Charger R/T responded with a quick smile. The black sphere had come to this fight intending to win and asked for reinforcements from the parent black sphere, locked at the center of the galaxy. It had complied by sending an enormous mass of itself toward the solar system.

This was the black mass that humanity had visited centuries before, and violated to retrieve the god fragment, the same mass that sent the first black sphere to punish humanity and which had been locked away with Charger R/T. This mass had a score to settle, and was now arriving behind the defending Charger R/T.

"I will utterly destroy the remembrance of Charger R/T under heaven!" the black sphere spat as it ordered the approaching mass to attack. Charger R/T was all at once hit from inside and outside the gate he held, both from the black sphere inside and the larger black mass outside. The attack compressed Charger R/T as if he were being squeezed out of existence, creating a blinding light and heat where he stood.

For the moment, Charger R/T was losing the fight, but he steeled himself and drew every

ounce of power he had to repulse the attack. It was then that Spyder saw his opportunity. From the shadows, this wretched malevolence launched his own attack. Spyder was as much a master of deception as Abarth had ever been and he drew from the universe's dark energy, creating a blinding field that blanked Charger R/T's white eyes from sight. Now that Charger R/T was blind and helpless, Spyder laughed at the demon's predicament.

But Charger R/T had little use for his eyes. Part of the first Hyborg program he had endured was the loss of normal sight. The program used technology to return vision to him in a mechanical way by enhancing the light spectrum as seen by normal humans. The resurrected Charger R/T had been constructed much the same as his first incarnation, but the technology once employed to enhance Charger's vision had been replaced with the god-like powers he possessed now. Slowly, methodically, with a savage smile, Charger R/T raised his head to stare directly into Spyder's eyes. At first Spyder wasn't sure whether Charger R/T could actually see him.

Spyder moved his head from side to side and Charger R/T tracked his every motion. Spyder raised his hand toward Charger R/T's face and waved. Charger R/T's smile expanded to a wicked grin, and he winked. In those blank, white, almost silver-colored eyes, Spyder saw his own reflection, a specter of fear and death. He realized now that Charger R/T could see him.

Charger R/T stretched his arms out from his shoulders, parallel to the ground, as if crucified. With his left hand, he began to draw toward himself the black mass from outside the gate. With his right hand, he drew the black sphere from inside the fortress. He pulled the spheres together, with Spyder crushed between them.

Frantic, the spheres struggled against being pulled closer to him, but it was futile. Charger R/T drew into himself all the forces that opposed him. Still at the gate, Charger R/T blended the two spheres into one, Spyder blended between and into them. He took his prize, which was unable to flee, like a fly caught and wrapped by a spider in a web, deep inside the fortress. A scream emanated from the black sphere as it struggled to escape, but it was held fast.

Charger R/T threw his prize into the flaming surface of the sun.

Then he slowly turned a full circle, looking at the solar system, at the sun and the remaining planets. Earth was gone, sent to a distant galaxy, so that Reader could birth a new breed of human, to give the experiment one more try. If the new humans survived, Reader and Dart could look after them. He was done.

He was sick of humans posturing, sick of their massive egos, their pride in the great and violent empires they'd created. Sick of their belief that they were the pinnacle of creation, perfection, the end point. They thought the universe had been made for them, that they deserved to live forever. Billions of them had blinked into space to escape the giants. They'd gone out, not in glory, but with a whimper. Yes, he was finished.

From the very center of Earth's solar system, encircled by a wall of impenetrable space debris, Charger R/T began warping and compressing time and space inside the fortress. The gravitational forces went off the chart. Even nearby galaxies felt the disturbance. The attraction to Earth's realm was formidable. Temperatures blazed as Jupiter and Saturn both ignited and smashed into the compressed field. Finally, Pluto, though very far away, was drawn into the center of the collapsing solar system.

All around Charger R/T, space began to buckle and bend, as everything in the solar system, including the humans who had blinked into space, was drawn into a singularity, a point of infinite density.

Charger R/T now burned with the brilliance of a thousand suns, and from this place he made

his final move. No god could hope to escape. In a final act of brutality, Charger R/T's mind reached out to find the home world of the giants and, with no regard for whether or not they were innocent, squashed the planet out of existence as if it were a bug on the pavement. The result of his violence dwarfed any super nova seen by man.

Then it was done.

Nothing remained but a black hole of unbelievably powerful gravity, hardly large enough to fit on the head of a pin, though the matter and energy it contained weighed billions of tons. In order to maintain itself, the black hole would need to feed on matter, to continue eating stars, but it was too small to do that. When it starved, it would become unstable and dematerialize, disintegrating out of existence.

Charger R/T stood in the black space where Earth's sun once existed, contemplating the surrounding void as it cooled and returned to the stillness of time.

## ✖

Lucas had blinked to empty space just outside the solar system. A technician and inventor, he was interested in the blink system even before college. One of the things he'd invented was a vastly powerful personal blink device and he'd had it surgically installed in his thigh.

Now he drifted. Alone.

He'd tried moving his arms and legs but that accomplished nothing, with no air or water to push against. Frustrated, he screamed.

And heard nothing. Then he remembered that sound could transmit only through a medium like air or water. He was voiceless.

Even if he had a companion, another human, they couldn't talk to each other. He was confined to a silent, helpless existence. Forever, because he was immortal.

Lucas saw Charger R/T blazing, imploding the solar system. He saw the void swept clean. Charger R/T had put the other drifting humans out of their misery, but had abandoned him, left him to "die" alone.

He had a sudden vivid memory of the fly paper hanging in his grandfather's cabin by the lake, of the flies stuck and struggling.

But the flies were lucky, very lucky. They died.

Lucas tried to remember why it was that he'd wanted to become immortal, why he'd had all the medical enhancements, but nothing came to mind.

He whimpered soundlessly as he floated in space. He didn't want to live forever and he didn't want to die. But what he wanted no longer mattered, for he had no voice, no power, and no choice.

## Chapter 18 Dart on Planet B

Dart said to the small green creature at his side, "I wanted to stay and support my father." It responded like an Earth dog might, sitting attentively and watching Dart as he spoke. They sat in front of a large rock which glowed red hot and, but for the absence of crackling, snapping sounds, the scene was of two friends sitting before a campfire which pushed back the cold blackness of the night. All around were windswept plains of gray-blue grass-like growth, enclosing them in a private oasis of peace and tranquility. The sky above was filled with many small planets, close enough for the naked eye to see geographic details on their surfaces.

"I really can't blame my father for sending me off like he did. I wouldn't have been much help in the fight." As Dart spoke, the small green life form oozed out a foul odor, perhaps because of its proximity to the red-hot rock. "Wow! You stink! No more squishy slug-like things for you before bedtime."

The small green creature reacted by clicking its disapproval.

"I was only kidding. I'll get you slugs before bedtime, but you have to stand further back from the heat because you really do stink."

The small green life form shuffled backward on its many limbs, as Dart had requested, hoping that obeying his command might reward him with more food.

Dart reached into a small bag at his side, pulled out several finger-sized slugs and offered them to his new friend. A growth shaped like an elephant's trunk emerged from what might have been its face to slurp up the squirming slugs like a vacuum cleaner. "Blah! I hate watching you eat," Dart said under his breath.

The creature had no eyes; instead, it used radar to locate its prey. It shuffled about on several stumpy little legs and its green surface was sticky, yet had sharp edges which cut Dart's fingers if he tried to pet it.

Dart had no idea where in the cosmos Charger R/T had thrown him. When it happened, he was considering Plan A, which was to stand by Charger R/T in the battle with the black spheres and the giants. What happened was apparently Plan B. All he remembered was his father sending him away from the battle in a blink of intense light and, when he landed on this planet, the first sight to greet him was his new green friend.

He stared up at the sky for a minute. "Okay, so I'll call this Planet B. Sometime I'll find out the name we had for it back on Earth. If we even knew about it."

Dart soon discovered that things were quite different here. His connection to the scientific knowledge humanity had used to care for the people of the four worlds was gone. The technology he possessed was useless, but he found it had been replaced with an amazing, incredible gift. He now had the same powers his father possessed, the powers of a god. He was able to manipulate and create anything his mind could conceive, along with the ability to see connections at the molecular level of all aspects of the universe.

"I don't know if you understand, but I'm not from this planet," Dart said to his small green companion.

The little life form stopped moving and reacted as if it were shocked at the revelation.

"Hey! Can you understand what I'm saying?" Dart asked the little creature. It had certainly reacted as if it understood. "Well, that will be handy." Dart smiled as he reached out to warm his hands at the heat of the radiant stone.

It occurred to him that a small enclosure to protect him while he slept would be good and,

instantly, a small hut appeared next to the glowing rock. "Neat!" Dart thought. Testing his abilities, he envisioned a 1957 Chevy Bel Aire and instantly it appeared just meters from where he sat. Then he thought it should be blue, not red, and immediately it was blue. "It should have whitewall tires," he said and, almost before he finished the sentence, the tires were whitewalls.

Dart was finding there were no limits to what he could do, but had no idea how he was doing it. He focused his mind on the universe to try and discover his location, but his view was like that of someone staring through a telescope. He had a limited view of the stars and the immensity of space. He soon realized he might spend forever searching for a clue as to where he was. Not willing to face that prospect just yet, he decided that tomorrow he would explore the planet he stood on.

When Dart awoke, it was still dark outside. Night on this planet lasted for several twenty-four-hour periods, balancing the lengthy days he would ultimately face.

Undaunted, he struck out, with the little green creature at his side, to walk and observe the unusual beauty of this place, which was evident even in the darkness. It was only semi-darkness, however, like the dusk the northern regions of Earth had once experienced. That realization made him wonder where Earth had ended up. He hoped that the programmed trajectory of the planet had gone according to plan, and that it had settled in an area of space very similar to where it had come from. His newfound powers didn't tell him whether that had happened.

After walking for a while, he realized he probably didn't really have to walk. By bending gravity to his will and adjusting the molecules of his feet, he levitated to a couple of yards above the surface of the planet. Unwilling to leave his new friend behind, he adapted the small green life form to levitate as well, and the two set off to explore the planet. The green creature seemed distraught about hovering above the ground and moving without intending to. It squirmed and jittered around for a while, but appeared to resign itself to hovering along behind Dart.

"What should I call you?" Dart asked his little friend. "Maybe I'll call you Snot." As he drifted along, he gasped in amazement at the scenery. The world they explored was radically different from any place he'd experienced before. The gray-blue grass-like growth that seemed to go on forever into the distance was interrupted only by small ponds of silver liquid, like pools of still mercury. Here and there, large boulders of ancient rock thrust upward from the ground. They apparently defied gravity as well, for they rested on small points anchored to the ground, looking like large mushrooms.

Dart was so busy thinking about the mushroom-like boulders that he didn't notice he'd left the grassy area. He hovered above a surface that looked like old volcanic lava but was yellowish in color. He turned back to see where the grasses had stopped and then looked off into the distance to see if there were more oddities. That's when he noticed the nodules. These bumps seemed to have popped out of the volcanic lava in an organized way. Curious, Dart hovered toward the swellings.

He remembered how his father once used a blinding field to disguise his presence. Dart replicated the process and he, along with his small green friend, became invisible. However, they were invisible only in his imagination, apparently, for he saw that the nodules were small huts and inside them resided living beings which were alarmed at the sight of something floating above their dwellings. They jumped about, jabbering madly, and pointing at Dart. He realized the blinding field was not working and turned it off. The small living beings immediately calmed down. Apparently, their eyes saw Dart only when the field was on. When it was off, he was invisible.

"Well, that's a switch." The small green life form clicked and chirped in a distressed way. It

was clearly upset at being near these new beings, and Dart could feel its alarm. "It's okay, Snot, I won't let anything bad happen to you. You're the only friend I have." The little green life form seemed to understand, for it became quiet.

Dart closely examined the life forms in the huts. He decided to try changing his appearance, something that the science he once possessed could do. If he looked the way they did, he might be able to interact without alarming them. They were very odd to look at, bluish in color, with a single limb or stump to stand on, several arms without fingers but with pincers. They had stocky bodies that looked like Frisbees, along with what had to be eyes on the back and a mouth on the front. Dart focused his mind and listened carefully to the jabbering these creatures made. Slowly a discernible language of sorts emerged.

The closest creature said to one nearby, "Be bad glide stick was you afraid." Dart found the sentence perplexing. The other responded, "You like me saw glide stick scarier me." It was one thing to recognize the words they spoke, something entirely different to get the meaning.

"Brindle pop a rock and hide, glide stick yields fear," the closest creature stated, as if it were a command of sorts. "More others must come, demand glide stick not stay!" With this response from the other creature, Dart was slowly making sense of the conversation. It appeared he was the "glide stick," and they were afraid of his appearance and were contemplating gathering forces to fight him.

Two other small creatures arrived by rolling across the surface like tumbleweeds. There were now four creatures at the hut Dart hovered over. They spent a long time touching each other upon arrival, which Dart guessed was a greeting. The more he watched and listened, the more he understood, but decided it would be best if he observed for a few days before trying to appear as one of them.

He would occasionally turn the blinding field back on in random locations around the nearby huts. This would cause the creatures to jabber wildly, giving Dart more time to try and understand the pattern of their language.

He soon understood the comment, "pop a rock," for as Dart appeared suddenly, a small creature would attach itself to the ground by its single leg, appear to digest a section of rock, then hurl it at Dart. Therefore, to pop a rock was to gather up a stone and throw it.

As dusk faded and the planet returned to daylight, Dart enjoyed what seemed to be perpetual morning. It appeared that the planet was locked tidally to its small red star, having one side of the planet always facing the sun and the other in perpetual darkness. The life that had developed existed only in a small band of land that circled the planet where the temperatures were conducive to life forms. The world's slight wobble produced the day and night effect.

About twenty of the small beings had gathered at the hut where Dart continued to make occasional appearances. They all jabbered and reacted violently when Dart turned the blinding field on, and soon Dart understood why. On one occasion, just as he activated the blinding field, he heard a terrifying screech from high above his head.

Dart quickly discovered that this sound came from a predator which hunted in packs of three. Their bodies looked like large gas-filled balloons, and they floated in the upper atmosphere until hungry, then descended to hunt for a meal.

He'd learned in school that intelligent life forms arise from environmental conditions which encourage complex tasks, and that the resulting adaptation generates complex thought. His teacher had suggested that a water planet with an oxygen atmosphere could develop intelligent jellyfish. If these jellyfish could biogenetically convert water to hydrogen, they could then use the hydrogen to enter the atmosphere and use their bodies like balloons. Floating above the

water, they could easily spot their prey. Then, releasing their hydrogen, plunge down upon their next meal like spears.

This was not a water planet, and the predators weren't jellyfish, but Dart supposed the principle held. He'd had no idea that causing the small creatures to gather near the hut meant that they would become meals. The little creatures instantly set up a defensive position by joining bodies and gathering rocks. They were ready for a fight.

The first predator descended through the thin clouds and plunged full speed at the creatures. They hurled a barrage of rocks to drive it off, and then the second one attacked. It used the same tactic, swooping in fast and drawing fire, while the third predator came in from behind. The third predator ejected from its body a thin, wicked-looking proboscis and, like a vampire mosquito, struck one of the little creatures and sucked all the liquid from its body.

The chaos caused the creatures to turn toward the third attacker, and that's when the first predator struck. In equally sickening fashion, the first predator struck and sucked dry a target. Then the second predator hit. Dart now realized why the huts were built so far apart. It was unsafe to gather in groups.

Dart felt awful at having been the cause of these creatures' deaths. He had gathered them together only to learn from them and instead, got five of them killed. He'd quickly blinked the three predators to the other side of the planet, but watched in sorrow as the small creatures displayed sadness and anger over the recent event, gathering the dried husks of their fallen comrades and committing them to a burial.

Dart had forgotten about Snot, and when he turned his attention back to his little friend, he was shocked. The small green creature looked like it was crying.

Planet B was very different from his own and yet so similar and familiar, with life forms that simply wanted to live in peace. Dart decided he had no business being here. He had caused enough grief, like his father, and he now understood how easy it was to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. And make the wrong decisions.

He would find his way home to Earth.

## Chapter 19 Charger R/T meets Charger

As Dart had planned, planet Earth materialized in a quiet corner of space, where it held prominent position around an average yellow star with a year-long ellipse, 365 day-per-year transit and a 24-hour-a-day rotation. On the surface of this green and blue jewel, in a grassy meadow sparkling with dew in the morning light, beside a wide river, sat a single box. As important as the Holy Grail had been to some people in the distant past, this box contained the answer to humanity's continuing questions. Will Earth survive? Will humanity survive? And what will they become?

She emerged from the box shaking and cold, alone and pregnant but not afraid, the mother of humanity at age twelve. She would have time to construct her new world before she turned eighteen and began to give birth to the children of Earth. She was a message of hope from a species which had finished its course, corrected some of its mistakes and had relinquished the stage to a new people and a new way of life.

She now stood naked on fresh, wet grass looking out at the world she owned, with only a single companion. By her side was a small, hovering crystal shard, light blue in color and perhaps a foot long. It was the only piece of technology sent with the girl, but a powerful companion designed to help her survive.

Reader glanced around, and memories rose in her mind. "My mother had a kind face, and thick red hair, and she called me Elizabeth. I strayed away from her one day into the great forest. Though I was then lost and alone, I now stand as the one thing between darkness and light for the human race. Was I chosen for this task by the strange god who found me that day?"

No answer came from memory nor from the blue shard. The shard never spoke to her, but they shared information directly, mind to mind.

The blue shard began by creating a small fire for warmth, then persuaded the trees to provide wood for shelter. The first animal to arrive was a small brown rabbit, carrying fresh vegetables for sustenance. A red fox came next, holding a large bird in its mouth, and shared the kill with the girl. Several other animals gathered, all bearing gifts to ensure that she would survive.

Thus, Earth responded to her needs, cradled and protected her, cared for and sustained her, gave her a place in the hierarchy of life, as it had to primitive humanity, hundreds of thousands of years in the past. She would be, not only the mother, but the queen of the new race of humans to come.

The shard, designed through a scientific understanding of all the known elements of the universe, could create anything, but provided only what the girl required. It appeared magical, but was, in fact, the highest and best of humanity's science. The simple box she had been in became a small house. A garden grew quickly around this modest place, the world offering its beauty to her. Over the next six years, the girl watched as the shard created small villages with simple roads, beautiful gardens, and healthy animals.

In her eighteenth year, she began giving birth to a new human each and every day. This was not ancient biology but a new aspect of science that produced these humans. She experienced no labor and knew and loved every single child.

Three hundred and sixty-five children were born each year and the shard saw to all their needs. Though the girl was a creation of science, her children were as frail and innocent as any child of humanity had been. But they rapidly came of age, and they too began to have children.

The cycle of human life spun again, slowly, inexorably.

When the population reached one thousand new humans, the girl's task was complete. She was programmed for twelve more years of life, then she would be no more. She loved the children as they grew, and named them, and would kiss them as often as she could. However, she knew that before she died, she had one final task. She had to help Charger.

Charger R/T no longer had a purpose, for he had killed Abarth and Spyder and put an end to their madness. He had destroyed the giants and the black spheres. He had watched for many years as humanity struggled with wars and chaos, while his dislike for people grew and grew. And then he'd ended it by destroying the solar system. All he wanted now was to distance himself from the wretchedness humanity exhibited.

The girl reached back through time, found the beast in his restless state, and did her best to soothe him to contentment. Charger R/T would have none of it. He tried to drive her voice from his fractured mind, but the whispers persisted, and she never realized the pain she caused.

One day he exploded in madness and decided to find his original self and end humanity for good. The arrow of time that bounced Charger R/T from century to century had brought him into the timeline with his older, but younger in time, self. He knew that this older self was, at this very moment, walking the surface of what had become the world ship, on his way to die beneath a great tree. Charger R/T decided that if he could persuade his older self to join him, the two of them could easily wipe out humanity and put an end to the never-ending madness.

Reader called to him, whispered in his mind, begged him to listen and forgive the people who had abandoned him, but the beast would not be swayed. Charger R/T blinked to the world ship and waited on the trail he knew his older self would soon be walking.

The older Charger looked defeated, his armor worn and cracked, often bleeding and causing him great pain when it rained. His feet were soaked in blood from walking and the thought of what he had done to the small, good people who had befriended him weighed heavy on his chest. He alone was responsible for the creation of the cannibals. He had, in a moment of impatience, not thought things through clearly and this mistake cost him the last of his pride.

Charger was a broken man when he walked the trail that led him toward a figure blocking his path. He stared long and hard, puzzled by the face this stranger presented. The Hyborg that blocked his path looked like a younger version of himself, strong and confident. It could only be an illusion.

Charger hoped the illusion would disappear, but it didn't. "Who are you?" Charger asked. The beast stood unmoved, looking fierce and wild, its face twisted and contorted. Charger distrusted illusions, and mumbled under his breath, "Great, now I'm nuts!"

The beast finally replied, "Brother, I have come for you, we have a great destiny to fulfill."

Charger stopped walking and pushed long graying hair back from his dirty, heavily lined old face. He stared into the younger face that blocked his path. After a few moments, the old vampire asked, "Do I know you?"

"We are brothers. I have come for you, for we have a task to complete." The beast replied, almost a command rather than a simple statement.

"I don't know who you are, or who you think you are. I don't care if you're real or a figment of my imagination, but I have served my time."

Charger was done causing grief and misery to a people that despised him. His blinding field had long since failed him and he did not care now if the humans of this world saw him. He would hide no more, for he only wanted an end. He would never again allow himself to be the weapon of humanity. He tried to step around the beast and go on his way, but the beast blocked

Charger with a hand on his chest.

"This is no illusion," Charger thought, "this is real." The old vampire stepped back, perplexed.

"I killed every last Hyborg, and I don't remember you," Charger said to the beast.

It replied, "Yes, I remember."

Charger looked hard at this younger Hyborg, trying to place the face. He had not looked into a mirror for so long that he had forgotten his own appearance. The Hyborg seemed familiar, though.

"You called me brother. Did we serve together in the wars?" Charger asked, as he shrugged his shoulders to relieve the pain he often felt from arthritis.

Charger R/T looked at his older self and, for a moment, felt pity and a wish to clean up the old guy. "Let's sit and build a fire. I have a story to tell you. After you hear what I have to say, I'm sure you will want to help me rid the universe of humanity."

The thought of sitting at a fire seemed reasonable to Charger. He had been walking day and night for almost two months, and he could use a rest. Night fell as the two Hyborgs sat together, enjoying the heat of a small fire. The smell of smoke always calmed the beast. The old Charger listened as his younger self told of a future where his actions just led to more suffering and pain, a story so bizarre as to be almost unbelievable.

"Wait, so you're my son?" the old Charger asked his younger self, unsure of the timelines.

"No, Dart is your son. Or my son, really," the beast replied with a growl.

"So, if I help you, he will never be born?" The old vampire asked, still trying to make sense of this story.

"It is not about who gets born or who lives and who dies. It's about stopping the madness of humanity. Humans are a plague; they foul everything they touch; they are a sickness the universe can do without!" Charger R/T was finding it increasingly difficult to explain the future without expressing tension.

"So..." The old vampire started to speak, then took a long pause. "You're me, but younger than me because you never age, and you are from the future. You've killed entire races of living beings and humanity ended up needing you to help them survive. You got a dead woman pregnant and killed a couple of gods."

The old vampire took a moment to think about what he had just said, then continued. "Do you have a strange ringing in your ears? I mean, can you hear yourself when you talk?"

The look on Charger R/T's face was one of shock and dismay. Had his older self gone mad? The two sat in silence for a time, while the light from the small fire cast shadows that danced around them.

Unexpectedly, a whisper arose inside the old vampire's mind. Reader pleaded to be heard. She was reaching out across the vast expanse of time and space to get but a moment of the old Charger's time, a chance to explain the other side of humanity's story.

"Well, what the hell," the old vampire thought. He replied in his mind to the whispering voice, "I've heard this guy's story, why not hear your side?"

In less time than the single blink of a human eye, she explained the grace and majesty of humanity. She told the story of a great and wondrous journey that the people of Earth had to make, and how he was only a part of the true story of a magnanimous people. For all their faults, for all their failures, humanity deserved the right to exist. Then the whispering voice asked the old Charger to do one final task that he alone could complete. He had to kill a god. He had to kill his younger self.

"Hey," Charger said to the whisper in his mind, "I am just an old man. I do not have the power to kill a god!"

"Take your blade and thrust it into his chest. I will give you a moment of my crystal shard's power," the voice said. "You must catch him off guard, for he has twice your speed and strength." She added, "I will do the rest."

Charger's broken and faded old armor seemed to hang like rags from his sagging shoulders as he let out a long sigh. "So I'm to be the weapon one more time," he thought. His aged face twisted with heavy lines as he pursed his lips and shook his head in frustration. Then he slowly looked up, his yellowed eyes meeting Charger R/T's over the dance of the campfire flames.

"Maybe you're right," the old vampire began, catching the attention of his younger self. "It does look like the rest of my life amounts to shit. I understand how you feel. Humanity created me as a weapon, used me, and then cast me out as a monster when I was no longer of any use. I can understand how you feel because what they did to you was wrong, too. I guess you have the right idea. We probably should end the insanity now, before it gets any worse."

Charger R/T was no fool and searched his older self's voice for any deception, but the old vampire was being truthful. His words were a genuine expression of honesty; he was agreeing with the madness of the younger Charger.

The old vampire continued to speak. "If you're right, and I'm not saying that you are, but if you are right, and together we kill every human, what will happen to us?"

"Well, I guess I won't ever exist!" the younger vampire offered, then added, "You will still have your life; you can still grow old. However, you'll do it alone. Humanity will be forever removed from the universe, and you will finally have peace."

Charger's hand slipped to the handle of his short sword. "You're right. We have been wronged, brother. I am sorry for what humanity has done to you. You gave them everything and they only took more from you. You have suffered something I can never hope to understand. You are by far the best thing humanity has ever had in its possession, and they should pay for what they did to you."

"To us, brother!" the younger Charger said, as he placed his hand on the old vampire's shattered shoulder armor, and gave it a solid, confident shake.

"To us," the old vampire agreed. "What do we do next?"

Just as the younger vampire opened his mouth to answer, the old and battered Charger drew his short sword, blazing into white hot plasma, and thrust it hard into the young Charger R/T's chest. It happened fast, the crystal shard doing its part through time and space at an inconceivable depth of science.

And the deed was done.

"I am sorry, brother, but the madness has to end with you. I meant every word. You were wronged, but we can't destroy the future for that." Within seconds, the young, strong beast slumped over into the twisted arms of what once had been a good man. From somewhere deep inside Charger's shell, Henry's eyes looked out at the world he had built. They filled with tears and, for a moment, he hoped that what he had done here was for the right reasons.

Charger walked to the tree the next morning before the sun rose. For a long time, he spoke with a scruffy, stray dog about his life, then stood up and stepped into the sunlight, as the whisper in his mind commanded him to do.

When he next opened his eyes, he was flat on his back, staring up at the most magnificent blue sky he had ever seen. The warmth on his face was strong and his body felt good, felt healed. He stood up and saw a nearby stream with clear running water. He walked, without limping,

without pain, to stare into the water at his reflection. It told him he was still Charger. But younger, stronger, more vibrant, his expression more angelic than demonic. All around him, in every direction as far as he could see, were groves of beautiful trees decorating a verdant plain.

From inside his mind, he heard the whisper.

She simply said, "All this I give to you." Charger looked out at the forests of what would someday be known as the state of Texas. It was 1432 CE, and he was in the territory of the Creek Indians.

Far in the future, the people of Deleray's town saw to the burial of the creature they thought was a god. The corpse was a young powerful-looking demon with a knife wound in its chest and burn marks on its strange armor.

## Chapter 20 Hidden menace

Dart sat on the unpainted cedar garden seat in Reader's orchard, his swirling black cloak folding itself around his body, his wizard's hat tilted to one side of his head. "So, Reader, you're all grown up. And you've had how many children?"

"Exactly what I was programmed for," she said. "One thousand." She was almost as tall as him, with a thick mass of red hair tumbling around her shoulders. Though an adult now, she still had the air of a little girl.

"Which means you have twelve years left to live."

Reader smiled and smoothed her plain green linen dress over ample breasts and hips. "It will be longer than that. My children need me." The blue crystal shard which did her bidding hovered near her shoulder.

"But Charger R/T and I programmed you for only twelve years of life after you gave birth to the new human race. I know, because I checked that part of the code just before I sent you and Earth into this solar system."

She smiled again. "Doesn't matter. You told me I'd have the power to read and to change minds, so I'm sure I can read and change my own programming."

"I suppose it's possible. But you certainly can't change my mind."

She focused her gaze on him and he could feel waves of power washing through him. After a moment, they stopped, and she frowned. "Why can't I even read your mind?"

"Because my brain functions logically, not emotionally." Dart relaxed against the back of the garden seat, relieved to know that she couldn't control him. "Maybe you can change my father's mind, since he often reacts emotionally, but don't count on it."

"Are you telling me you have no emotions?"

"Of course not," Dart said. "I'm still human enough to have emotions, but I don't allow them to cloud my thinking."

"I still have twelve years to figure out the programming," she said. "Dart, where have you been all this time? It seems such a long time since you said goodbye and sent me away because the giants were attacking. Did Charger R/T win the war?"

Dart laughed. "Oh, yes! He knew he would win, of course. He destroyed the giants and the black spheres and threw them into the sun. Then he crushed the entire solar system into a black hole."

"I'm glad," Reader said. "That means my family is safe from those villains." She shifted a bit so that she faced Dart directly. "If you went to the other side of the galaxy, how did you manage to find me?"

"I can blink from place to place, just like Charger R/T. In fact, I now have most of his powers. I had a little misadventure on Planet B, where I first landed, and decided Earth was a better place to be. Anyway, I thought you might need help with something. So I blinked from planet to planet until I found you." Dart stared at Reader for a moment. "Didn't Charger R/T tell you all these things?"

Dropping her gaze to the grass at her feet, she said, "Oh, a bit. But I've been too busy with my children to pay much attention. And he just wanted to disappear so nobody could get at him. You know what he's like."

She was hiding something. Dart wished he could read minds. But he doubted that she'd teach him how to do it. "Remember the whole history of humanity that I told you?"

"Of course. It is embedded so deeply in my circuits that I can never forget."

"So, you still like stories? Shall I tell you the story of Planet B?"

She nodded. "Yes, please. It'll be like old times."

## X

Several weeks later, Dart interrupted his exploration of Earth and blinked to Reader's small cottage. The place was situated on level bench land a couple of hundred feet above the broad river valley below, and he found the view delightful. The river, according to history, had once been known as the Columbia, the mountains to the west as the Cascade Range. Green, yellow, and black farmland made a crazy quilt of the valley floor. The sun shone, butterflies fluttered, and Reader invited him to sit on the garden bench with her. She put a plate of cookies and a pot of tea on the rough wooden table before them.

"Where have you been?" Reader asked. "My three little hamlets are all within a twenty-mile radius and it's a long time since I've been anywhere else. I like to keep an eye on my children."

"You do an excellent job of being a mother."

"Don't make silly statements," Reader said. "That's exactly what you created me for, isn't it?"

She was as fast as ever with the smart remarks, and he wasn't going to dignify that one with a reply. "I've always been curious about Earth because the only time I spent here was the few days it took to prepare you for recreating humanity." He leaned back and stretched out his legs. "It's a beautiful planet. I think I'll be happy here, so I've built a simple nest high in the tallest redwood I could find. And every day I wander around to see what I can see."

Reader glanced out at the valley. "It is perfect, isn't it? So where have you ventured?"

"Oh, here and there. Mostly places where I already know the history."

"Would you want a woman as a companion on these trips?"

"No," Dart said. "I'm not into the Adam and Eve scene. Don't try to mother me, Reader. I like the solitary life."

"Just trying to help," she said.

Dart rose. "Then help me find out what's wrong with Earth."

"There's nothing wrong with Earth!" Reader looked indignant.

"How do you know if you've never gone more than twenty miles away? Bring your crystal shard and your mind-reading ability and we'll blink to where I was this morning, on an isolated southern continent. I think that was where the Dinosauroids lived before the Grays ruined Earth with the Night of the Black Rain. I watched a deer come out of the trees and begin to browse on a low shrub. Suddenly, it vanished."

"Didn't you look for it?"

"Sure. There was nothing there. No body, not even a stray hair. Though the earth was slightly disturbed, I think."

"You imagined the whole thing!" Reader said. "How could a deer just vanish? It probably fell into a sinkhole."

"And the sinkhole closed up around it?" Dart shook his head. "No, the ground was solid. And the field was flat to the horizon. No rocks, no cliffs."

"All right, I'll go with you."

She grasped the blue shard and took Dart's hand. They blinked. Two seconds later they rematerialized in an open field, with a forest of pines off to the left.

"That's where the deer came from," Dart said, pointing at the forest. "It strolled out and began browsing on those shrubs, right there." He moved his pointing finger to some low bushes ten feet away. The sun had just risen, and the air was fresh.

Reader walked ahead to the location Dart was pointing at and looked around at the ground. "I don't see anything. Are you sure you saw a deer here?"

"Of course, I'm sure."

She looked at him doubtfully. "And this is the exact same place?"

Before Dart could reply, she exclaimed, "Oh! I just felt something underfoot. In the earth. Like a vibration." She paused. "It's gone now."

"Can you read what's there?"

Reader went quiet, focusing on the ground. Then she shook her head. "Not a thing."

"If it eats deer, shouldn't it have a mind you can read? Or is it only human minds you can read?"

Reader frowned. "I can read any creature that has a mind, no matter how primitive, and even basic impulses in nonsentient beings. I have to be able to do that, you see, so I can change them if I want to."

"But I'm sentient and you can't read my mind," Dart said gently.

"You're different. You're more powerful than I am, and you can shield your thoughts from me. So can Charger. But nobody else can." Reader turned back to stare at the ground again.

"There's something alive just under the surface," she said, running a hand through her thick red hair, "but I don't know what it is. I do know that it doesn't have a mind."

"We could try to dig it out," Dart said.

"No," Reader said. "Leave it alone, whatever it is. If it likes the occasional feast of venison, that's no different than a puma." She glanced around. "Anyway, this is an isolated continent. There's no way it could travel to mine and interfere with my children."

"Well, if you're sure..."

"I'm sure. Let's go back."



Reader sat quietly in her small house, watching the peaceful activity in the fields below, and wondering if it was time for the blue shard to build a fourth hamlet. The population of the first three was growing rapidly and, while her children were still eating well, it might be time for them to cultivate more farmland and expand the flocks of sheep and herds of cattle.

Perhaps it was time to start inhibiting the number of births. She had already slowed the rate of development for children so that it took them almost as long to reach maturity as the old humans. It would be criminal to allow the planet to be engulfed once again with billions of humans, draining and poisoning its resources. And, of course, fighting over them and destroying each other.

If she provided her people with more technology, they could do the building and developing of land themselves. But no, it was too soon. And maybe it would always be too soon. They were happy and productive in a pleasant rural life. More technology might make them restless and greedy. They might want to re-activate the silent cities and find new amusements. They might decide to make war.

Reader rose to make some tea. No, she would leave things as they were. The children received a good basic education and were creative in all the arts. Perhaps someday, far in the

future, when she could be certain that their ethics and motives were pure and unshakable, she'd let them make such decisions for themselves.

She had just placed the teapot on the table when someone rapped at the door. Reader opened it to find Pine, the headman from Arcadia Village, on his knees, and accompanied by an amazing metal apparition which had the shape of a human but couldn't possibly be one.

"Get up, Pine," she said. "I've said I don't want any of you kneeling to me."

He shook his head and kept looking at the doorstep. "Oh, Queen of the World, here is another god. I don't know what to do."

The metal apparition spoke through a slit in the helmet it wore. "For God's sake, woman, get me some morphine!"

Shocked, she stood silent for a moment, and let the apparition's jumbled, frantic thoughts roll over her.

*"I'm in pain. My skin itches. My joints ache. I need morphine; it holds me captive. I want to go home. Where's my world? Where are my notes for that last experiment? What's this strange place? What's happened to me?"*

Obviously, this creature who reached toward her with a metal claw was a human. Of some sort. "Pine," she said, "I will take care of this new god. Go home and don't worry."

Pine rose to his feet, backed away from Reader and the metal man, and hesitated. "The god said some interesting things. He said he came from a city. My Queen, do cities have more gods like this one?"

"Go home," Reader said firmly. "Now."

Pine went.

Reader reached into the metal man's tortured mind and soothed it, led his thoughts away from itching skin and the demands of addiction. It was a weird, unpleasant experience being inside his chaotic mind. The thoughts and memories were jumbled, scattered, senseless. They clawed at one another.

"Go sit on that bench," she said, pointing to her garden seat at the edge of the orchard. She assumed he could sit; his limbs appeared to be jointed in the right places. "I will bring tea." She had no idea whether or not he could drink anything, or if he wanted to, but she certainly needed a stimulant.

The man, if indeed it was a man, obeyed her, his legs creaking slightly. Reader followed with her tray and focused part of her powers on his mind, the rest on trying to make life seem normal again.

"What's your name? Where have you come from?"

There was a hesitation, then the mechanical voice said, "My name is Doctor Lorenzo Jules. I am the head of the biology department at Port Townsend University. I have been in hibernation, and I need to find my people."

She could feel his mind becoming restless again. "Who are your people?"

"The other professors, of course! And my friends. But some disaster must have struck the coast. I could find no life in Seattle or anywhere around there. Who are you?"

She ignored his question. "And what year did you go into hibernation?"

"In 2050. The government had once again rejected my recommendations, in favor proceeding with CGY International's cryogenics program. The fools! They will never resolve the cellular degradation resulting from freezing the human anatomy."

Reader could hardly believe it. That date was 2,866 years in the past. Years full of history. He had survived the Night of the Black Rain, when the alien Grays covered Earth in a five-foot-

thick layer of hot iron shards. He had survived bombings and earthquakes and floods, and the planet being moved to another solar system. Could she explain all that history to him? Should she?

*"The window is calling me. I'll jump. Twenty-one stories down. That would finish me, that would get rid of the morphine dragging me down. I'm always craving. I need the drug. How else can I stabilize my brilliant mind and slow it down, so it doesn't tear me apart?"*

Finally, his mind was making some sense. But she didn't think it would survive learning how many years had passed. "What were your recommendations?"

"Why, about hibernation, of course! You've read of me, I'm sure. But I couldn't make the military understand the relevance of my program. They still believe that we can travel great distances to the stars without aging. They are idiots!"

Doctor Jules was agitated, his brain producing such violent electrical flares that she was amazed he couldn't see them. She reached into his mind again and smoothed its functioning.

*"No, I won't jump. I'll prove to this ignorant and stupid world that my hibernation program works perfectly. I'll show the bastards!"*

Obviously, his hibernation program worked extremely well since he'd been asleep for nearly three thousand years. The old humans, the ones who had all died when Charger R/T destroyed the solar system, wouldn't have needed it, for they had been immortal.

Her new humans were not immortal. She intended that they should go through the natural cycle of life and death, just like other living creatures. A person who lived forever would merely suffer excruciating boredom and probably create trouble because of it. Some people, if they believed they had all the time in the world, would have no motivation to do anything. She would not allow her children to sit around like a bunch of zombies, staring into space. Their lives needed to have shape; they needed goals.

"Do you know how long you were in hibernation?" Reader asked. She couldn't resist teasing him about it just a little.

The mechanical voice was slightly hesitant. "No, but it can't have been very long. Something went wrong. The contractors who built the concrete bunker two levels below the basement of my house must have made an error. Or the self-aware computer I hooked up to the web and to my brain must have failed, even though it was the most powerful I could buy. I told it to keep me in hibernation, so I'd survive far into the future."

"And so you have."

Doctor Jules waved a hand in what seemed an angry gesture. "This isn't the future! No big buildings, no spaceports. Just a few peasants herding cows. I'd say the computer took me into the past, except I don't believe in time travel. And it can't be the past, because the city of Seattle looks the same as it did when I lived there. So, some disaster must have caused all the people to be evacuated."

*"Wrong, wrong, all wrong. No body. But heart, lungs, brain. Even blood. No body. I am a metal man. Wrong. Taskers, Taskoids. Computer made body with Taskoid technology. Wrong. Skin itches. Brain itches! Wait, no, morphine takes it away. Yes?"*

Reader took a closer look at Dr. Jules' metal face as she soothed his brain again. He'd been scratching with his metal claws, for the face was crisscrossed with scars. The man was mad. How long could he last in this condition? She would make him happy for a little while with some morphine; he could smoke it and thus draw it into his lungs.

She bade him wait while she brought his drug. She had morphine, of course. In this non-technological world, it was the best painkiller, though highly addictive. Still, he was already

addicted, so giving him some wouldn't make things worse. It would be a relief to have him stoned; she hated being in his mind.

Doctor Jules' metal hands eagerly grasped the pipe she handed him and soon he relaxed into a stupor.



Three days later, Dart materialized on Reader's front doorstep. "You have company, I see," he said, pointing at the garden bench where Doctor Jules slumped, his metal limbs in a tangle.

She invited Dart inside, brewed some tea, and told him the story of her strange visitor. "I've been keeping him stoned while I decide what should be done with him. He's quite mad, you know. He wanted to wake up far into the future, but the future looks nothing like he thought it would. His old, familiar world has disappeared entirely. Nothing of his body remains except the brain and the organs to support it. And he's trapped inside a metal body which he thinks is making him itch."

"No wonder he's mad," Dart said, "in both senses of the word. Is he psychotic?"

"Probably. His brain still functions after a fashion, but if he's off the morphine for more than a couple of hours, it becomes so chaotic that I can't predict what he'll say or do. Not only that, but he seems to feel pain everywhere in that metal construct and, though it's a phantom pain, it's driving him even more frantic."

"Can't you change his mind?"

Reader shook her head. "I tried, but it won't stay changed. It's uncontrollable."

She shrugged. "As long as I keep him on morphine, he's harmless. But it's a nuisance having him on my garden bench. Perhaps I'll give him a small house in one of the villages and have my people look after him. They could give him the drug."

"I think that's a good idea," Dart said. "But what happens if they accidentally give him an overdose?"

"That would solve the problem, wouldn't it?"

"I'm surprised at you," Dart said. "I thought you'd be eager to save his life."

"He doesn't have a life." Reader sighed. "When he's free of the drug and his brain is working, he's insane and very unhappy and could well be a danger to my people. When he's on the drug, he's comatose and comfortable. So, he needs to be kept comatose."

"So what you're saying," Dart said, giving Reader a thoughtful look, "is that you will let whatever happens happen. That you're not going to interfere."

She seemed puzzled. "I suppose that's what I'm saying. Yes, of course. Doctor Jules is the result of a failed experiment. As long as he does no harm, what happens to him is not my concern."

"I just wanted to be clear on that," Dart said. "Because I have something far more important to tell you."

Reader's smile changed to a frown. "More deer disappearing?"

"Not just deer. In the last few days, I've seen rabbits disappearing, and a full-grown brown bear. Here on this continent."

Now she looked shocked. "That's too close! Did you investigate?"

"Of course," Dart said. "But nowhere could I find any trace of the animal that vanished or any disturbance of the ground. It's almost like the animal was vaporized as it was being sucked into the ground."

"That's frightening. Have you felt any vibrations underfoot, the way I did?"

He nodded and pulled his cloak a little more firmly around his body. "Nothing has attacked me. In fact, the vibration lasts only a second or two and then stops."

"The thing may not have a brain," Reader said, "but that doesn't mean it can't sense life. In fact, it must do so if it's targeting animals. It must have sensed life in you and me, so why didn't it attack us?"

"Well, we're the most powerful beings on this planet, except for Charger R/T. This underground creature may not be sentient, but it must be able to distinguish between what's edible and what will bite back."

"We have to do something!" Reader exclaimed. "I don't want it absorbing any of my people. Or their livestock."

"I agree, but not only because of your children. Whatever this thing is, I suspect it's spread underground everywhere. The other day I noticed my redwood tree is drooping. Then that the trees all around were doing the same. So I dug up the ground in a small clearing."

"And?"

"Nothing," Dart said. "And I do mean nothing! No worms, no mycelium, no life of any kind. It means the trees are not getting enough nourishment. The mycelium forms a mantle around a tree's feeder root in a symbiotic relationship. Symbiosis means they feed each other."

"Dart, this is serious!"

"I know. If it continues, all the plants will die. And if the plants die, so will the animals. And so will people. Which means that Charger R/T's plan to save you, and thus give humanity another chance, will have failed."

Reader got up and paced back and forth in the small kitchen. Suddenly she stopped. "Wait a minute. What about the ocean? Won't life in the ocean survive?"

"We've found this plague, whatever it is, on two continents. I think that says it's underground everywhere, including beneath the ocean."

"Have you tried to kill this thing, Dart?"

"No. Killing is Charger R/T's department, not mine. I don't want to interfere."

Her eyes blazed in outrage and her hair crackled with electricity. "But it will attack my children! Don't you care? And if you don't, why did you go to all that trouble, training me and sending Earth out of harm's way so that humanity could continue?"

"It was an experiment," Dart said. "It may be that humanity won't survive, no matter what we do. In which case, it will be a failed experiment, like Doctor Jules. And, if it fails, something better may evolve. I'd like to see what happens."

"I don't believe this!" Reader cried, her hands balled into fists. "Oh, I wish I could get inside your mind! I'd change it so fast your head would spin!"

"Sorry, not going to happen." Dart rose. "It would seem that our powers are in balance. You can't change my mind and I can't change yours. Even though you seem happy not to interfere with Doctor Jules, you're determined to interfere on behalf of your children. Your maternal programming is too strong."



Three days passed. Reader moved Doctor Jules down to Arcadia and appointed Pine as caretaker. Pine was nervous about his new duty but thrilled to be the personal servant of a god. Reader wondered if she'd made a mistake in letting her children think of her as a god, but

because of the blue shard and her own powers, they'd have regarded her as magic in any case. It really didn't matter, of course. The word 'god' had always been just a synonym for 'magic.'

On the fourth day, Willow, headwoman of Camelot village, came panting up the path. "My Queen! A sheep has disappeared! I saw it go!"

"Show me!"

But, as had happened before, there wasn't even a bit of fleece to indicate where the sheep had vanished into the earth. Reader paced back and forth, probing with her mind, but found nothing. And, as she had long ago discovered, the blue crystal shard took orders, but did not answer questions.

A week passed and so did a dozen head of cattle. By the end of the second week, more sheep and four humans had disappeared. The villagers were terrified.

Reader went in search of Dart and found him in his redwood aerie. The needles on the tree were turning brown. "We have to do something about whatever is killing animals and people! If this goes on, there won't be any living things left except you and me."

"Birds," Dart said. "We'll still have birds."

"Don't be stupid!" she cried. "You're callous and cruel, you're..." For once, she was at a loss for words.

"We'll have to call on Charger R/T," Dart said. "He can decide what to do." He paused. "As long as you understand that we're both risking our lives. When Charger R/T is angry, he's capable of killing everything in sight. Including us."

Reader's lips quivered. "We can't call on R/T. He's dead."

Dart's head snapped up. "Dead? My father is dead?"

"I tried to save him," Reader said. "I tried to give him peace, but all he wanted to do was kill every last human. He visited Charger on Neo Terra the night before Charger was due to burn up and die, and he asked Charger to help him wipe out humanity."

"I'm beginning to see where this is going," Dart said. "So Charger killed Charger R/T?"

"With my help, yes," Reader said. "It's Charger R/T who is buried on Neo Terra. I sent Charger back to 1432 in what was called Texas, here on Earth. There weren't many people around back then and I thought he'd be happy there."

Dart shook his head. "I don't believe this. You killed my father. You killed your own hero."

"It was either that or my children," Reader said.

After a moment, Dart sighed. "I understand that. I don't like it, but I do understand it. Then we'll ask Charger to judge what should be done."

"I'm afraid to ask him," Reader said. "He might be angry at what I made him do."

"You haven't seen him since?"

"I've left him alone, which is what I thought he'd want."

"All right," Dart said, "then maybe we can bring back Henry instead." He rose. "But before we go looking for Henry, I want to find out where this strange underground predator came from and perhaps that knowledge will tell me what can destroy it." He paused to look at Reader. "You do understand that if this predator kills every living thing on Earth to feed itself, eventually it, too, will die for lack of food. It would be interesting to see what evolution comes up with after that."

"I don't want to lose my children," Reader said.

Dart wrapped his black cloak tight around himself. "Go back to your valley and do what you can. When I find out what we need to know, I'll come for you."

"Please hurry!"

She wanted to say more, but Dart had already gone.

Reader blinked back to the river valley and her three villages, Arcadia, Camelot, and Harmony. She'd planned on naming the fourth village Felicity but building that one would have to wait.

There had been more deaths during the short time she was gone, and she helped the villagers drive the remaining animals into their barns. Surely the predator wouldn't be able to reach them through concrete floors.

She became more cheerful as she worked. She'd done the best she could for Charger and, since he and Henry were sort of the same person, she was sure he'd be on her side. Even Charger R/T had liked her. Otherwise, he wouldn't have rescued her from an ordinary life that she could barely remember now.

Back in 2075, she'd been Elizabeth, the nine-year-old daughter of Andy and Lucy Kent. Charger R/T, on one of his bounces through time, landed in Somalia and saw her playing with red jackal cubs in the Somali forest. He'd been struck by her innocence, by her youth, natural energy, and love for life. And by her lack of fear.

When he offered to lift her up so she could watch an elephant browsing in the trees nearby, she willingly took his hand, then sat on his shoulders to watch. She hadn't even thought he was ugly, just different.

Charger R/T had decided to preserve her as the perfect human and keep her hidden so she wouldn't be infected and ruined by the rest of humanity. Since she was already escaping from an argument with her mother, and from her two bratty little brothers, she thought this was a wonderful idea. So, he put her into hibernation, treating her as tenderly as a precious jewel.

She'd been there for more than 2700 years, almost as long as Doctor Jules had been in hibernation. But Charger R/T's science was better than the doctor's. She'd wakened unscathed when he and Dart started the Reader program and used her body and mind to help create the computer program that became Reader.

No, she didn't need to worry. Henry/Charger would do what she wanted. And he wouldn't kill her because he needed someone to look after the humans. He wouldn't kill Dart either, because Dart was his son. Sort of.

## Chapter 21 Judgment day

Charger sat in front of his small campfire, enjoying the heat and flickering flames. It tended to get chilly at night on this part of Earth, though the days were generally sunny and hot. It was good to be alone, good to rest. The occasional pair of yellow eyes that flashed at him from the darkness were nothing to worry about. Only coyotes, curious to see if he was good to eat, but deterred by the flames and the aura of power surrounding him that they sensed but did not understand.

"Some gift that damn voice gave me!" Charger muttered. "I guess it thought I'd be at peace here. Ha! I'm so far back in time that this place isn't even America yet." He poked at the fire and added another log.

"Trouble is, the voice didn't stick around to see what happened. I should have known humans would find another way to fuck up my life. These damned Indians won't quit attacking me and, because of that, they will continue to die."

When he'd first wakened, in the middle of Texas, the native Indians were curious about him, but then became frightened because of his great size and power. As soon as one of them screamed, "Wendigo!" they were all terrified. And, like most frightened beings, their reaction was to attack. He'd already killed four hundred and eighty-six of them and still they kept coming. He had no desire to kill but, now that he was young and strong again, he had no desire to die, either.

Watching the coyotes gave him an idea. They built dens where they raised their young. He'd build himself a den that would keep the natives out. He knew how to do it, too, because in one of the places he'd been, there were sandstone blocks perfect for a wall, just like the blocks those crazy Egyptians had used to build pyramids.

Charger threw another log on the fire and thought back, again, to the last days of his life on Neo Terra and the long conversations he'd had with that scruffy dog and her pups. Well, it wasn't what you could call a conversation since he did all the talking. She just listened. But there had been something about the way she did it that made him think maybe she wasn't really a dog at all.

Then it came to him; the dog was the same being as the voice that had made him kill Charger R/T. She'd hung around, listening to his stories and his trials and decided to use him to get rid of R/T.

Not that he blamed her. If that voice/dog was Reader, actually travelling back in time from 4800 CE, where his younger self said she'd been programmed to save humanity, she was only doing what she was designed to do. He'd been fucked around by humans enough that he didn't want to have anything more to do with them but killing them all wasn't the answer. Getting away from them was.

Except the damned Indians wouldn't leave him alone. Charger rolled into his blanket and stared up at the myriad of stars shining in the dark sky. Well, he was tired of running and tired of fighting. Tomorrow he'd start building that rock wall. Not only that, he'd build an underground chamber where he could be free of all the creatures wanting to spill his blood, including the coyotes.



Dart sat on Reader's garden bench. He noticed that the orchard was looking brown and sick. Often, now, he felt that slight vibration under his feet. Reader looked almost as tired and discouraged as her orchard.

"Have you found out what we're up against?" she asked. "You've been gone longer than I expected."

"It's a very strange story, not easy to put together. First, I had to get a piece of this underground monster so I could analyze it, which meant suspending myself from a tree branch, in hopes that it wouldn't be able to sense me if I wasn't touching the earth."

"But that worked?"

Dart nodded. "I waited until a rabbit disappeared right below me, then jammed my sword into the earth and managed to slice off a small chunk before the thing shrank back into the earth."

"Was it horrible?"

He shrugged. "Not especially. Just a very thick sort of ooze, of no particular color. It tried to get away from me and rejoin the main body, but I put it in a jar and blinked to a lab in that big empty city on the coast."

"Doctor Jules called it Seattle. And?" Reader looked impatient. "What did you find out? We must hurry, you know. I'm losing more people and animals every day."

"Once I analyzed the thing, I put the results into one of the Taskoid computers," Dart said. "They recorded absolutely everything. And so I know what it is and where it came from. It's DNA."

"DNA? How could it be?"

Dart leaned back and cradled his mug in both hands. "Let me tell you the story. It began in Berlin, in April of 1945. Conrad Dengler, a doctor specializing in experimental medicine and a long-time member of the Nazi party, had a laboratory hidden deep below the city. He had been experimenting on Jews for years and his research notes on DNA were extensive."

"You didn't tell me this story before," Reader said.

"I didn't know the story then. Dengler never made it into the history books. But he had summarized his notes and recorded them. The world at that time agreed on five components of DNA: A, T, C, G, and mC. His work predicted a sixth component: mA. And more exciting still, a seventh, which he decided to call X. This seventh factor made it possible to create two stable DNA strands linked together to create a stable mutation.

"But Dengler didn't get the chance to gloat for long. The director of the lab summoned him to a meeting, where he was told that the Russians were at that very moment marching into Berlin. Germany was preparing to surrender. Dengler was instructed to burn his records and destroy his experiments."

"And I'll bet he didn't," Reader said.

Dart nodded. "You're right. He may have destroyed much of what was in his little empire, but he couldn't reconcile himself to getting rid of the most ambitious experiment he'd ever conceived, using component X of DNA. I suppose he hoped for some kind of miracle that would bring him back to life so he could work on it again."

"Bring him back? Did he think the Russians would kill him?"

"Reader, you've never lived through a war. Dengler had lived through World War I. He was afraid the Russians would torture him for information, and he was determined not to tell them anything. So, he swallowed a cyanide capsule and that was the end of him."

"But the experiment survived."

"Amazingly, it did. The underground lab survived the shelling. The jar containing the

experiment which, by the way, looks like ooze from a swamp, remained undisturbed until an earthquake ruptured the walls of the lab some hundred years later. The jar tumbled off the shelf and broke. The amorphous brown blob inside began to grow, developing small tentacles which allowed it to move. Eventually it oozed through cracks in the concrete and burrowed into the earth."

"And now," Reader said, "it's obviously grown to become entangled underground around the entire Earth. It's like a virus. It's an evil monster, eating everything in its path."

"I'd call it a plague." Dart leaned forward. "It has no intelligence, no brain.

It's not evil in itself, only in its effect on humans and the other living things on Earth."

"Well, that's evil!" Reader was scowling. "And I hate it!"

"What's the point of being angry with it?" Dart asked. "You might as well be angry with the tide, or the knowledge that DNA has seven components. They're facts, that's all."

"Charger will kill it and save my people," Reader said. "What are we going to call this underground brute? Not that Charger will need a name for it."

"I'm calling it the Septimus plague. And really, I'd prefer to leave it alone and see what happens. I'd like to see what your new humans do with it."

"And I'd like to get into your head and change your stupid mind!" Reader snapped. "How irresponsible can you be? No, don't answer that. How can my humans deal with the monster when they have no weapons, no specialized knowledge?"

"Well, you know whose fault that is, don't you?"

"I saw no reason to provide them with technology they didn't need. It was better for them to retain their innocence."

Dart smiled. "So now they need technology to create weapons and they don't have it. Why don't you let nature take its course? It will, anyway."

"I am Nature!" Reader exploded. "And things are going to go my way!"

"You'll have to manage it without my help."

Reader rose and paced back and forth along the path. Finally, she turned to Dart and said, "Are you willing to have Charger arbitrate?"

"It's the only choice, obviously. Though I think I've reminded you already that if he's angry because we disturbed him, he's quite capable of killing both of us."



Before she and Dart left to resurrect Charger, Reader directed her children to pack up their belongings, and drive the remaining herd animals out of the river valley and up into the mountains. "Find a place that has solid rock underfoot," she told them. "Take all the food you can carry and fodder for the animals. If the magic I am about to perform works, you'll be able to come home again in a few days."

"And if it doesn't," Dart muttered, "the eagles will be picking your bones."

As soon as the humans were on their way, Dart and Reader blinked to the Boston Museum of Science and located the exhibits marked *The Rockwall of Texas Skeleton* and *The Giant Skull of the Americas*. The bones in these exhibits were all that was left of Charger, who had died peacefully in the late 1800s, according to Tasker records. They extracted the bones' DNA in preparation to recreate their arbitrator.

"Shall we try to bring him back as Charger or Henry?" Dart asked.

"I'd prefer Henry," Reader said. "He's sure to be more compassionate."

Dart decided not to voice his opinion that there was little difference between the two. After all, Charger had been created from Henry, and Henry had been looking out of Charger's eyes during thousands of years of history. He was quite sure, whatever Henry/Charger called himself, that he would retain the same immense powers Charger had wielded. And, with this second resurrection, he would no longer be programmed to save humanity. Despite himself, Dart shivered.

They completed the final part of the task high on the mountain where Reader's people had gone. Henry paced around the forest glade for a few minutes, shaking his head and muttering. He was old and crippled now but definitely Henry, a normal-sized man, not a monster like Charger. Finally, he confronted them. "All right, this better be good! What the hell do you want now?"

"We need help," Reader said.

Henry glared at her, and Dart could feel immense power emanating from him. He might be ordinary in size, but he was still Charger the Hyborg. Would he help or would he explode into a killing spree?

Reader seemed to realize that Henry was less benevolent than she'd hoped and hurried to relate the story of the Septimus plague. "I want you to kill this plague," Reader said, "and save the new humans."

"And I want you to leave it alone," Dart said. "The humans will either adapt or die. If they die, something better may appear."

"So, you want me to be judge and jury, do you?" Henry said. "Fine, but you're going to regret it."

Is he going to kill us now or later? Dart wondered, clutching his cape a little closer around himself.

Henry pointed a finger at Reader. "You have no right to interfere with humanity's evolution. You did your duty by giving birth to the new race and now you must let them evolve on their own."

Reader opened her mouth, but before she could say anything, Henry turned to Dart and said, "You have no place here, either, interfering and experimenting with Earth's living creatures, whatever they are."

"I don't want to interfere," Dart said. "I just want to watch what happens."

It was as if he hadn't spoken. Henry turned once again to Reader. "You were meant to live only another twelve years, but you've been interfering with that programming. You're trying to grab the ultimate power exercised by Mother Nature and that is wrong. You don't have the wisdom to fill such a role."

Dart felt Henry's gaze burning into him. "As for you, sitting around watching humans and Earth be destroyed is just morbid curiosity. You could be doing something more constructive."

Henry turned his back and walked away. Dart was just letting out a sigh of relief when the god swiveled on his toes and came back. "I could destroy Earth and every remaining creature on it. That would kill the Septimus plague. But I won't. Maybe I'll just let whatever is happening happen. I'd like to go back to sleep. Both of you are going to pay for bringing me back to life and embroiling me in humanity's problems again."

"But..." Reader began to protest.

Henry pointed his finger at her, and her face went white. "You're afraid I'll destroy you. But I'm going to do something much worse." His look now included Dart.

"I have decided to let both of you live, but without your godlike powers. And I am banishing you from Earth forever. I will blink you to a distant planet, where you can contemplate your

mistakes for eternity. If you survive that long, though I guarantee you won't want to." Henry finally smiled. "But you'll never again wake me from a well-deserved rest!"

The world vanished.

## X

Henry noticed a break in the trees and, beyond, the shimmer of blue water under sunlight. He walked toward it and found a small mountain lake nestled in a forest surrounded by snow-covered peaks. It would be a good place to wait for death, which couldn't come soon enough, as far as he was concerned. Oblivion was paradise. He knew; he'd been there twice now.

He limped down to the water's edge and found a rock to sit on. After a minute or two, he leaned forward to look into the water. Was that face his? He hadn't seen his reflection for thousands of years. He could remember that young Henry was supposed to be good-looking, with blue eyes and dark brown wavy hair. But who was this old geezer with wild, gray hair and a wrinkled, worn face?

Back 3,000 years, when he'd volunteered to be a super soldier, a weapon, he gave up being human, being Henry. He became Charger the Hyborg. That's who he could see in the water now, Charger's ugly face and the chaos that always surrounded him.

Henry jerked his head away. He could no longer see the image, but the old, bitter, bloody memories remained, vivid and immediate.

As a soldier, he'd always been moving, always doing something, so he had no time to think. If he wasn't fighting, he was polishing his sword, or repairing his armor, or dealing with Mac and Jill. He never had time to think about what he'd done.

Now he was old, with nothing to do except think about it. It didn't matter that he still had the powers of a god. That didn't allow him to forget the fact that he was a murderer on a grand scale. He had killed millions, including entire species of life forms.

The ones he'd killed paraded through his shuddering mind, face after face after bloody face. He knew how many there were, how long it would take to look at them all. He'd always counted things; he couldn't help himself.

Worse, he realized that if he'd never been programmed to save humanity, if he'd only become a Hyborg physically, he would still have done the same things. It was Henry, his essential self, who was the monster, not Charger. It was Henry who had to take responsibility for the killing.

The faces went on parading before his inner eye, until he became aware that a shape composed of millions of molecules was moving in his direction. A mathematical miracle of some kind. Then his vision cleared, and he saw that it was a little girl.

Now he remembered where he was and why he'd been called here. Reader's new race of humans had almost been wiped out. The few who were left had fled here, into the mountains, where there was only a thin layer of soil over the rocks and, in places, no soil at all, to escape from the Septimus plague.

The little girl kept moving toward him, along the pebble beach, or jumping from rock to rock where there was no beach. When she came close enough to talk, she said, "You shouldn't be sitting there, mister, with your feet touching the ground. The monster might get you."

"Tell me about the monster," Henry said. "I didn't know there was one."

She shook her head, amazed at his ignorance. "It's very bad," she said. "It hides underground and reaches out to snatch people. Then it eats them. Didn't your people tell you that?"

"I have no people," Henry said.

She came closer and perched on a rock right at the edge of the lake. "That's awful." She brushed her bangs out of her eyes. "I don't have very many. There's only forty-nine of us left now."

"Why did you venture down here to the lake, if you think the monster is lurking?" Henry asked. "It's a brave thing to do but seems a bit foolish."

The little girl shook her head. "No, not foolish. We're hungry. We ate all the food we brought with us. I thought if I stood in the lake, not moving at all, that a fish might swim up to me and I could grab it."

That was one thing about humans; they never gave up. They might be wrong about everything, but they never gave up. The Septimus plague wouldn't touch him, for the same reason it hadn't touched Dart or Reader. It would sense its own death in him.

"If you're not afraid, maybe you could help us. Would you help us, mister?"

Yet again humanity was asking for help. But why should he? He'd helped, time and time again, and his only reward was being shunned and exiled because humans couldn't bear to see what they'd created in him, couldn't bear to be reminded of what he'd done in their names.

He wanted to tell this child the whole story, to explain what had happened, but she wouldn't understand. She'd think he was crazy. Reader's children were innocents, with no knowledge of history and no understanding of what they might become themselves.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Maple."

"And your father's name?"

"Cedar."

Trees! They named themselves after trees.

"What's your name?" Maple asked.

"Henry."

"That's a very strange name. What does it mean?"

"It doesn't mean anything, Maple." And it didn't. Anyway, she wouldn't understand what he was talking about if he told her that Henry had been the name of a British king. Several kings, if he remembered ancient history.

Maple tucked her knees under her chin, being very careful not to let any part of her touch the ground. "So will you help us, Henry?"

"Yes." He couldn't refuse. Even without being programmed to help, he couldn't refuse.

He put his hand on the earth and sent a killing wave of power into the being he sensed beneath his feet. It began to die, quickly, as the waves shot through its bulk, emanating all over the world, like a lake ripples when a rock is thrown into it. He looked and saw the slope behind him drop as much as a foot, the trees quivering, as the being collapsed underground. The water in the lake, too, was choppy, though no breeze blew.

Because the Septimus plague had eaten most of the animals above ground, as well as those below the surface, its carcass would be filled with concentrated nutrition. There might be enough left of every kind of creature to begin breeding again. The plants would recover, too.

Henry rose, his stiff muscles protesting. "I've killed the monster," he said. "You're safe now."

She looked at him doubtfully, then began to smile. She trusted him, foolish child!

"Then come and meet my people," she said. She climbed down from her rock and put her hand into his.

He felt a sudden upsurge of tears. Blinking them away, he walked beside her.

She stopped and looked up at him. "My grandfather died before I was born, so I never knew him. Maybe you could be my grandfather?"

Henry felt an unfamiliar movement of his cheek muscles. Was he smiling? Maybe. He'd had a granddaughter once. Beth. He looked down at Maple and a name came to him. "Your mother's name is Aspen."

She looked up at him, eyes wide. "How did you know?"

"Grandfathers know everything."

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## Appendix

Osteology of The Giant Skull of the Americas  
and the associated but distinct skeletal remains of The Rockwall of Texas Skeleton  
from northeastern and southern locations of Texas  
and  
a re-examination of the phylogenetic relationships

Science International Peer Review Paper for submission. June 23, 2018. Cincinnati  
Science Museum of America, Anthropological Commission on the existence of the “Giant Skull  
of the Americas and its significance to the Preservation of Ancient Societies.” Chilton Sutton  
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Mexicanda

### Abstract:

We reject the claim that The Giant Skull of the Americas and the skeletal remains of The Rockwall of Texas Skeleton are connected and thus comprise the remains of a single individual. The idea that this combined beast was the mythical giant of the First Nations populations seems farfetched, though the clearly recorded oral history of the southern American First Nations has shown them to have had contact with humans of sizeable proportions. J. Smyth's rendition (1883) of a single giant originating in Atlantis and terrorizing and appearing in battles over all the southern states of America is, without a doubt, not science.

### Introduction:

Here we present the skull explained by J. Smythe of the Boston Museum of Science, December 17, 1883, known as the Giant Skull of the Americas. The proportions and dimensions are confirmed and as stated by J. Smythe. Both the weight and extents are in accordance with sizeable growth and suggest a body size in excess of twelve feet in height. The robust nature of the skull described by the thickness of the bone also suggests the strengthening and elongation of the limbs and main trunk of the body to be both excessive and possibly genetically altered. However, the process of this genetic alteration and the purpose of its nature are both speculative and suspect. It is our opinion that it is natural and expected considering the matrix and deposition where this skull was discovered.

In 1883 on or about the date of June 19, one Jim Castel, farmer and landowner, discovered, while working his land in the state of northeastern Texas, a skull perfectly intact and complete buried in the soil. Castel sold the skull to the local museum for the sum of two dollars where it remained in collections until a chance discovery by J. Smythe, when it was then transferred to the Boston Museum and described.

In J. Smythe's paper, December 17th, 1883, a correlation and dubious connection to an area known as “The Rockwall of Texas” was made. J. Smythe argues that a partial skeleton found buried in a stone cairn located at the center of the Rockwall complex was, in fact, the missing body of the skull he now possessed. In our opinion, we reject the connection of the skull to this partial skeleton based on the features of the preserved parts.

The skeleton is clearly twenty percent larger than the skull, and the presence of osteoderms, skin armor with currently unknown metallic origin is problematic. It seems more reasonable to consider the partial skeleton of Rockwall Texas as a chimera, and not related to the Boston skull. The dramatic rendition of this skull and skeleton as told by J. Smythe seems to be both fanciful

and exaggerated, and the idea that this combined beast would be the mythical giant of the native Indian populations seems farfetched. Though the clearly recorded oral history of the southern American First Nations has shown them to have had contact with humans of sizeable proportions, it has been stated that the natives battle “giants” and not “a giant.” J. Smythe’s rendition of a single giant terrorizing and appearing in battles over all the southern states of America with First Nations peoples and then constructing a massive complex of stone walls and alcoves in Texas to fend off natives seeking revenge is without doubt not scientific.

To further his fabricated evidence, J. Smythe also suggests that several known communities of ancient American stone builders are of such high-level construction and mathematical precision that they could be derived from only one source, namely Atlantis. The suggestion that ancient Atlanteans found the need to construct stone encampments around Middle America and then engineer a humanoid beast to terrorize American First Nations is simply nonsense. J. Smythe presents little solid evidence to support this wild rendition of American history, instead relying on “vast amounts of time and Earth process to obliterate any real tangible artifacts.” This, in our considered opinion, is too convenient and simplistic to be evidence of any real scientific significance.

We will in this paper confirm the discovery of the four enlarged, recurved, and serrated incisors found modified into a necklace as the very same teeth missing from the giant skull. J. Smythe is correct in his conclusion that the four teeth were at some point in history worn by a member of a tribe, possibly as a distinction or recognition for a great deed, stated by First Nations traditions to be conferred on great leaders or warriors. The realization that these four teeth are, in fact, the dentition missing from the giant skull clearly defines this hominoid as carnivorous, also possibly cannibalistic as mentioned in several First Nations oral traditions of the time and this location. To date we have conferred with all the collections departments of every museum across America and into Canada and can confirm that no other giant skulls are held in containers or crates.

We can only conclude that this skull is unique and singular unless others are recovered from the matrix at some point in the future. As to the partial skeleton found at some considerable distance from the skull, we conclude the two are not related. The partial skeleton is unique in that the long bones of the legs and arms seem to have been deliberately broken at some point when the hominoid was living. This is determined by the healing and recovery and use of the limbs in life. A small piece of composite material was discovered on one partial leg bone section and appears to be grafted or mechanically fastened in a manner as yet undetermined. Its purpose is also unknown.

Two hair samples were later recovered by our team of researchers at the Texas cairn site, but the degradation to the genetic makeup was too severe for identification. No useful research can be gained from these samples at this point, and they have been preserved for future generations that may have better methods for recovery. S. Williams did, however, recover some small fragments of clothing which proved to be period specific and common.

We would, at this point in our treatise, like to record that the item classified as GEP-127 was appropriated by the United States government from our dig site, an action both highly unethical and unconstitutional. To date, the only scientific information we can record from this cylindrical object approximately 350mm in length, is that it emitted an unknown and intense energy source. It has been described by Sutton as similar to a hand grip found on tools or weapons. This object appears to be of metallic construction and was considerable in weight. Had it been connected to some implement, we speculate that it might have been a power source.

## Materials and Methods

The original description of The Giant Skull of the Americas and the associated but distinct skeletal remains of The Rockwall of Texas Skeleton (Smythe, 1883) was based on unprepared specimens, so as not to destroy the remains. The unprepared specimens comprised two main but distinct and almost complete humanoid remains. The matrix was removed by mechanical and chemical techniques. The species concept used in this paper follows the phylogenetic species concept of Nixon and Wells (1993, 1998). Hence the diagnosis of The Giant Skull of the Americas and the associated but distinct skeletal remains of The Rockwall of Texas Skeleton is based on a unique combination of characteristics that differentiates this taxon from all others. The anatomical nomenclature used here generally follows Bates and Dart (1996) using the English equivalents of the Latin terminology.

## Systematic Anthropology Descriptions

### Skull

The skull is well preserved and complete. Its general dimensions and weight are twice that of the modern human counterpart. The thickness of the bone is dramatic and robust and exceeds twice the thickness of its modern counterpart. There are two weak crests on the cranial face above the prominent brow ridges that rise 20mm from the surface. The orbits are excessively large for the overall size of the skull and appear rectangular and off centered from the vertical center of the face. The nasal cavity is exceedingly large with the presence of dramatic turbinals deep inside the skull which can only be explained by positing an extremely acute sense of smell. The orbital lobes on the back of the skull are too large for regular visual acuity and suggest a high degree of night-capable vision, suitable to a nocturnal lifestyle. The mandible and the existing dentition are omnivorous and robust with the exception of the four removed recurved and serrated front teeth which are predatory and exceed 60mm in exposed length beyond the root. A high degree of auditory acuity is represented based on the presence and size of the remaining bony structures. The brain case and assumed associated soft tissue are an abnormality in the skull for they are equal in mass to present day humans, suggesting the remaining empty cavities found in the skull must have had a function and were filled with some as yet unknown materials.

### Axial Skeleton

**Dorsal Vertebrae:** The preserved trunk elements are regarded as midposterior dorsals in the absence of ventral processes. The five vertebrae are well preserved; the anterior three are exposed in ventral view and are fused together. The last two are in lateral view and show signs of unusual development or possibly disease. The result is inconclusive and confusing. The articular surfaces are laterally compressed due to either preservation conditions or possible signs of disease. The consideration of genetic mutation is rejected. These bodies are marked by deep longitudinal depressions and their parapophyses are developed in a central position, that seems impossibly connected to a singular osteoderm of immense size and perplexing lack of weight, constructed of some as yet unknown metallic compound.

**Synsacral Vertebrae:** The last two vertebrae of the sacrum are preserved, and bear elongate transverse processes, which retain their individuality and are caudally directed. The last process is narrower than the preceding one. This trend continues in the caudal vertebrae.

**Caudal Vertebrae:** The caudal centra seem to be amphicoelous. These vertebrae have elongate and narrow transverse processes that, like those of the synsacral vertebrae, are directed caudally. At the cranial border of the second caudal there is an unusual bifurcate, ventrally projected ossification that probably represents a massive hemal arch.

**Ribs:** Fragments of several ribs are preserved, although none of them are articulated with the vertebrae. Three of these ribs are fairly complete and lack uncinate processes. The haphazard distribution of the ribs suggests the body was disturbed after death.

#### Osteoderms

At first inspection of these unusual and completely unexpected osteoderms, our first impression was that they were some form of ancestral tool. They are of metallic origin and incredibly light weight and appear ridiculous in size compared to the overall size of the remains of this specimen. The only conclusion is both speculative and unproven: that these osteoderms are unbelievably connected to the bones of this specimen. However, if this specimen did contain bone armor, it is surely of unprecedented importance. These osteoderms show signs of deep pitting and damage and are so large in size that, had they been connected to this specimen, its ability to move with any flexibility is called into question.

#### Thoracic Girdle and Sternum

**Coracoid:** Both coracoids are preserved, exposed in ventral view. The additional preparation has revealed the shoulder end of the right coracoid, while that of the left one is missing. Both coracoids are typically hominid but are two and a half times the size of the average human, being extremely robust and showing signs of stress fractures in life. The following information is considered problematic and should be considered with caution. One large osteoderm was found some distance from the remains that appears to have been connected to the coracoids. Both coracoids have several coordinated holes that suggest mechanical fasteners were used to adhere these shoulder armor plates to the body. The persistence of these holes cannot be explained as evidence of disease or postmortem interference.

**Scapula:** The new preparation has revealed the shoulder portions of both scapulae and part of the body of the right one. Unfortunately, the preserved areas contain little significant new information. The presence of additional holes, as noted by J. Smythe, are still visible and their purpose is still inconclusive.

**Sternum:** In addition to the cranial area described in the original study, the new preparation has revealed the caudal part of the sternum. The sternum is of unknown metallic compound, light in weight and heavily damaged. The sternum is broad and flat with small divots across the surface. Internal to the body on the sternum are ruminates of fibrous material that appear only long enough to be connected to the soft tissues of the body, and for what purpose is still unknown. The difficulty of describing this specimen cannot be overstated.

#### Thoracic Limb

**Humerus:** Additional preparation has revealed the right humerus, exposed in cranial view with its osteoderm still fused and articulated. It is as long as or slightly shorter than the ulna.

Although the bone part of the humerus is crushed, some extent of disphasement between the axial planes of both extremities is still visible. This is a primitive condition known to occur. At the proximal end, the pectoral crest does not curve cranially. In proximal view, the head is cranially concave and caudally convex. There is strong evidence that the humerus was disarticulated in life and severed in half, removing a 120mm section of bone in the center and the replacement and fusing of the osteoderm. The bicipital and tricipital muscles must have been massive as is evidenced in the striations on the bone and metallic section. The distal extremity is crano-caudally compressed, and its cranial surface does not show any evidence of the fossa for the brachial muscle. However, there may have been some mechanical fastening of this muscle.

**Ulna:** Only the proximal half of the ulna is preserved, and it is exposed crano-ventrally. The ulna is broad and robust and correct for the bodily proportions; however, the radius is missing. Here we do not mean unpreserved, but medically missing. It is replaced with a large, possibly metallic, rod that was broken and may have once been attached to another osteoderm. This may indicate that the ulna was also severed in life and a metallic extension used to complete the ulna.

**Radius:** Refer to above.

#### **Metacarpals and Manual Phalanges**

The right hand of this specimen was revealed with the additional preparation and found to be fully complete and perfectly articulated, with all the bones of the hand being present. The term “bone” is loosely applied here for although the “bones” are present, they are not bone. They are, in point of fact, of metallic composition of as yet unknown materials. The most striking feature of the hand is the proximal phalanx which is slender and elongate; the distal phalanx is a claw. There are four digits to the hand and a robust bone-crushing thumb. It is assumed that the left hand is present but at a greater depth in the matrix and as yet not recovered or was removed from the body deliberately.

#### **Pelvic Girdle**

Perfectly preserved and common for males of modern humans. It is the only section of bone that remained uncrushed and perfectly preserved and can be rotated 360 degrees for inspection. All aspects of modern physiology are present and therefore not worth repeating here. The only exception is what appears to be engineered holes sporadically placed in the bone.

#### **Pelvic Limb**

**Femur:** Both femora are preserved. The right is exposed in medial view and the left one crano-medially. Both femora are sectioned evenly with a metallic insert to lengthen the bone and connected to osteoderms. The right one is absent, and the metallic section shows signs of breakage. Both femurs are excessively robust and considerably shorter than the tibiotarsus. Both femoral shafts are slightly convex, and the femoral head is oval and extremely large. Deep striations are noted, and muscle mass must have been dramatic. The right femur shows signs of “bad knees” and this specimen must have walked with a pronounced limp.

**Tibiotarsus:** Only the right tibiotarsus is present and found to be dramatically shattered after renewed preparation. The bone also shows signs of being sectioned in the middle of the shaft but the connecting metallic structure and its osteoderm are missing. The damage to the tibiotarsus is

extensive and possibly explains the missing presence of a foot, for the remaining bone suggests that the loss was during life. The damage is so severe that this must have contributed to the death of this individual.

### Conclusion

While we find the original work completed by J. Smythe in 1883 was accomplished very well for its time in history, addition preparation has revealed much more complete information of both The Giant Skull of the Americas and the associated but distinct skeletal remains of The Rockwall of Texas Skeleton. We cannot concur with Smythe's original assertions that the two specimens are connected. However, we cannot entirely rule this line of reasoning out, for we cannot prove reasonably that Smythe is incorrect. The scientific fact that such a humanoid creature existed in the late thirteenth century in what is today's continent of North America and had possible contact with ancient peoples of that time is both disturbing and controversial.

The associated rock walls and cairn found with the skeleton in Texas date to the same time using carbon 14 techniques, and so conclusively prove an association is correct. The twenty-mile square enclosure with right angle construction is clearly manmade and representative of a well-formed society. It cannot be proven that the skeleton found is the constructor of this enclosure or whether others enclosed the skeleton in it as a burial plot, and any speculation is clearly non-scientific. Recent excavation work using ground-penetrating radar done at the Rockwall Texas site has identified a vague outline of a complex that appears like a dwelling, located on the northeastern side of the Rockwall complex. However, until the matrix is fully removed and examined, conclusive proof of a dwelling cannot be verified.

Finally, if The Giant Skull of the Americas and the associated but distinct skeletal remains of The Rockwall of Texas Skeleton are connected, the image of a humanoid of this size and caliber is deeply disturbing.

## TIMELINE Book 1

66 MYA Gray aliens explore Earth, cause dinosaur extinction  
65 MYA Grays return, develop intelligent Dinosauroids  
1.5 MYA Grays create intelligent humans  
1 MYA Human First Ones build three great cities underground.  
12,000 BCE Human Mahouds find a new home in space, Alcazaba  
2250 BCE Tasker robot from Mahoud explores Earth  
1700 CE The Grays' spaceship captures a god fragment  
2025 CE USS Rothschild sent to planet Crest.  
2030-33 CE Mahoud-Earth war. Charger the Hyborg created  
2040 CE Discovery of city below Stonehenge  
2050 CE Dinosauroids merge their timeline with Earth  
2055 CE Mavens steal a spaceship to escape Earth

## TIMELINE Book 2

2100 CE The Tasker War on New Eden  
2205 CE First Gray attack on Crest  
2255 CE Grays inflict Night of the Black Rain on Earth  
2256 CE Charger creates new humans on Neo Terra  
2315 CE Spaceship Loki lands on Crest, then lost in space  
2365 CE Deleray sees Charger burn up under a tree  
2623 CE God fragment found, Charger R/T created  
2635 CE The Grays have imploded. There is no war.  
2640 CE Charger and the god captured in a time-lock

## TIMELINE Book 3

3640 CE. Abarth releases Charger RT, the First Ones and the god from the time-lock

3650 CE Pennington and her followers find the Prime

*Flashback to Planet Crest events:*

2025 CE Spaceship USS Rothschild lands on Crest

2065 CE Spaceship Loki sent to Crest but goes astray.

2105 CE USS Rothschild arrives on Crest.

2205 CE First Gray attack on Crest. Abarth and Charger travel back from 4255 CE and Charger RT kills Abarth.

2300 CE Charger RT destroys heaven and the entrance

2315 CE Loki arrives on Crest, a dead world

2316 CE Reanna leaves on the Loki, goes astray again

*Normal time sequence resumes:*

3716 CE Loki with Reanna arrives on New Eden

3717 CE Dart is born.

3730 CE Abarth betrays Pennington

3800 CE Abarth loses war with Charger; goes to prison.

4250 CE Abarth, Jet & Spyder escape from prison.

4255 CE Abarth attacks the four worlds. Abarth & Charger RT travel back to 2205 on Crest.

4750 CE Black sphere attacks the four worlds and fails

4800 CE Black sphere and giants attack the four worlds; Earth and Reader sent to another galaxy; Charger destroys the solar system.

*Flashback to 2365 CE on Neo Terra/world ship*

Charger RT meets his older self, Charger.

Reader sends Charger back to 1432 CE

4916 CE Henry kills Septimus plague, saves Earth and humanity once again.

## GLOSSARY

### 1. Real world terms and definitions.

*antigravity* — the antithesis of gravity; a hypothetical force by which a body of positive mass would repel a body of negative mass

*Antikythera Mechanism* — 2,000-year-old astronomical calculator built by ancient Greeks

*antimatter* — matter's twin, but with an opposite electric charge. When matter meets antimatter, they annihilate each other, leaving nothing but energy behind. The big bang created equal amounts of the two, but today the observable universe is composed almost entirely of ordinary matter. This asymmetry is one of the greatest unsolved problems in physics. Antimatter is not the same as dark matter (see below).

*Area 51* — The US Air Force facility commonly known as Area 51 is a remote detachment of Edwards Air Force Base, within the Nevada Test and Training Range. The intense secrecy surrounding the base has made it the frequent subject of conspiracy theories and a central component to unidentified flying object (UFO) folklore.

*BCE* — Before the Common Era. Now used in place of BC (Before Christ)

*binary language* — the digital representation of speech

*black hole* — a geometrically defined region of space-time exhibiting such strong gravitational effects that nothing—including particles and electromagnetic radiation such as light—can escape from inside it.

*bunker buster* — a bomb designed to penetrate targets buried deep underground

*CE* — Common Era. Now used in place of AD (“Anno Domini” in Latin, or “the year of the Lord” in English)

*cryo* — a combining form meaning “icy cold”

*cyborg* — A cyborg (cybernetic organism) is a being with both organic and biomechatronic parts. The term cyborg is often applied to an organism that has restored function or enhanced abilities due to the integration of some artificial component or technology that relies on some sort of feedback.

*dark matter* — a mysterious substance; its gravitational pull seems to hold galaxies together, like a massive skeleton, but we can't see it. We only know it's there from calculations of the speed at which galaxies move. The matter we know and understand accounts for just four per cent of the known universe; the rest is dark matter and dark energy.

*Dhuusamareeb* — Dhusamareb in English, also spelled Dhusa Mareb, is the capital of the Galguduud region of Somalia. It serves as the center of the Dhusamareb District.

*dimensions* — Classical physics describes the three basic dimensions as up/down, left/right, and forward/backward.

*Enola Gay* — the Boeing B-29 Superfortress bomber which dropped the first atomic bomb.

*FEMA* — Federal Emergency Management Agency.

*fourth dimension* — The fourth dimension is time, which is not spatial, but a way of measuring physical change. We cannot move freely in time but must subjectively move in one direction.

*Gobekli Tepe* — An archaeological site, regarded as of great importance, at the top of a mountain ridge in the Southeastern Anatolia Region of Turkey.

*Goldilocks zone* — Also called the habitable zone or life zone, the Goldilocks region is an area of space in which a planet is just the right distance from its home star so that its surface is neither too hot nor too cold and liquid water remains on the surface of the planet without freezing or evaporating out into space.

*hertz* — Defined as one cycle per second. One of its most common uses is the description of the sine wave, particularly those used in radio and audio applications, such as the frequency of musical tones. The unit is named for Heinrich Rudolf Hertz, the first to conclusively prove the existence of electromagnetic waves.

*Higgs boson field* — (nicknamed the ‘god particle’) an invisible force field that stretches across the universe, encasing us like a Jell-O mold, and giving mass to elementary particles within it: the stuff that makes up stars, planets, trees, buildings, animals, and all of us. Without mass, electrons, protons, and neutrons wouldn’t stick together to make atoms; atoms wouldn’t make molecules; neither we nor our planet would exist.

*hominid* — any of the modern or extinct bipedal primates of the family Hominidae. Used in the text as a term for naturally evolving humans.

*hominoid* — same as above, but used in the text to refer to human lines altered by the alien Grays.

*Kuiper Belt* — a disc-shaped region of icy objects beyond the orbit of Neptune, billions of kilometers from our sun. The Kuiper Belt and even more distant Oort Cloud are believed to be the home of comets that orbit our sun. The known icy worlds and comets in both regions are much smaller than Earth’s moon.

*LSD* — Lysergic acid diethylamide (acid) is a psychedelic drug, known for its psychological effects, which can include altered thinking processes, closed- and open-eye visuals, synesthesia, an altered sense of time and spiritual experiences. First synthesized from a chemical in ergot, a grain fungus that typically grows on rye.

*Lycan* — A werewolf or lycanthrope (from the Greek), is a mythological or folkloric human which can shapeshift into a wolf or hybrid wolf-like creature, either purposely or after being placed under a curse or affliction, such as a bite or scratch from another werewolf.

*MIT* — Massachusetts Institute of Technology

*nanoparticles* — particles between 1 and 100 nanometers in size. Nanoparticle research is currently an area of intense scientific interest due to a wide variety of potential applications in biomedical, optical, and electronic fields.

*plasma* — one of the four fundamental states of matter, the others being solid, liquid, and gas. A plasma is an ionized gas, a gas into which sufficient energy is provided to free electrons from atoms or molecules and to allow both species, ions and electrons, to coexist. In industry, plasma torches are used to cut metals.

*quantum entanglement* — In quantum physics, entangled particles remain connected so that actions performed on one affect the other, even when separated by great distances. The phenomenon so riled Albert Einstein that he called it “spooky action at a distance.”

*redshift* — In physics, redshift happens when light or other electromagnetic radiation from an object is increased in wavelength, or shifted to the red end of the spectrum.

*R/T* — the performance marker used on Dodge automobiles since the 1960s. R/T stands for Road/Track. (See below for the definition used in the text.)

*Shillelagh* — An alien fighting machine named after the Ford MGM-51 Shillelagh, an American anti-tank guided missile designed to be launched from a conventional gun.

*star-in-a-jar* — Nuclear fusion is nature’s atomic power. It powers the sun and, if it can be made to happen on Earth on a large enough scale, promises to solve all of mankind’s energy problems. It would be clean, last forever and create no long-term nuclear waste. One experimenter claims to have achieved it using sound waves. Sonoluminescence is a process that transforms sound waves into flashes of light, focusing the sound energy into a tiny flickering hot spot inside a bubble. This star-in-a-jar effortlessly reaches temperatures of tens of thousands of degrees, hotter than the surface of the sun.

*supersymmetry* — A proposed type of space-time symmetry that relates two basic classes of elementary particles: bosons, which have an integer-valued spin, and fermions, which have a half-integer spin.

*telematics* — information technology that deals with the long-distance transmission of computerized information.

*telomeres* — an essential part of human cells that affect how our cells age. Telomeres are the caps at the end of each strand of DNA that protect our chromosomes, like the plastic tips at the end of shoelaces.

*Tesla coil* — a form of induction coil for producing high-frequency alternating currents.

*Titan* — the largest moon of Saturn. Thought to be a prebiotic environment rich in complex organic chemistry with a possible subsurface liquid ocean serving as a biotic environment.

*Toba* — The Toba eruption occurred in Indonesia about 71,000 BCE. Its erupted mass was 100 times greater than that of the largest volcanic eruption in recent history. The eruption deposited an ash layer over all South Asia, the Indian Ocean, and the Arabian and South China Seas. This event may have caused a global volcanic winter of 6–10 years and possibly a 1,000-year-long cooling episode.

*Ununseptium* — a super-heavy artificial chemical element with temporary symbol Uus and atomic number 117. It is the second-heaviest of all the elements that have been created so far and is the second-to-last element of the 7th period of the periodic table.

*Wankel engine* — a type of internal combustion engine using an eccentric rotary design to convert pressure into rotating motion. Over the commonly used reciprocating piston designs the Wankel engine delivers advantages of simplicity, smoothness, compactness, high revolutions per minute, and a high power to weight ratio.

*Wendigo* — a half-beast creature in the legends of the Algonquian peoples along the Atlantic Coast and Great Lakes Region of both the United States and Canada.

*Woodhenge* — a Neolithic henge and timber circle monument located in the Stonehenge World Heritage Site, just north of Amesbury.

## 2. Terms coined specifically for this book

*blink system* — a technological triumph, it requires a massive system of orbital satellites, quantum computers, and devices surgically attached to every human. Each device is numbered and catalogued, then integrated into a global network of systems and subsystems which any individual can access virtually. This allows a traveler to pick a destination and activate the transport, or the blink, which removes him from his present location, then reassembles him instantly, molecule by molecule, at the desired destination. Similar to the 20th century telephone system. One can call up the address where one wishes to go, then be deconstructed and reconstituted all in a blink.

*Dinosauroids* — Troodon dinosaurs developed by the alien Grays into super-intelligent creatures for servants

*fifth dimension* — consists of the three dimensions all humans experience, plus time and space, elevated to a higher plane of existence. A being in a fifth dimension could observe and interact with a being of the third or fourth, but the reverse is impossible. A quantifiable plane of existence where the observer experiences all the dimensions simultaneously, as if they are one.

*First Ones* — a small group of humans were selected by the alien Grays for development into super-intelligent beings suitable as servants, called humanoids. Some of these escaped, developed a great empire and evolved into the Age of Energy, where they discarded their physical bodies and became known as Enoch.

*Hyborg* — a combination of hybrid and cyborg, applied to physically and mentally altered soldiers

*Mahouds* — a branch of the First Ones which went off on their own and settled Atlantis

*Mavens* — the name given to bright students whose DNA was manipulated to create highly intelligent experts in particular fields, who might quickly find new ways to reclaim the planet after the Mahoud-Earth war.

*Megiddo max* — Megiddo maximum security prison

*R/T* — Resurrected terminus, or living dead

*Taskers* — a class of robots built by the Mahouds

*Taskoids* — Tasker robots which acquired the ability to make decisions

*time-lock* — created by the alien Grays, this device isolates matter and energy from the normal flow of time

## **Books by Lea Tassie**

Tour Into Danger

Cats in Clover  
Siamese Summers  
Cat Under Cover  
Cats & Crayons  
Calico Cat Caper

The Case of the Copycat Killer

Deception Bay  
Deep Water  
Dire Straits

Green Blood Rising  
Red Blood Falling  
Shockwave

A Clear Eye  
Double Image  
Eyes Like a Hawk

Harvest  
Walking the Windsong  
Connections

Two Shakes of a Lamb's Tail  
Baa Baa Black Sheep, Have You Any Words?

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## **Books Edited by Lea Tassie**

Charger the Soldier  
Charger the Weapon  
Charger the God  
The Missing Year

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## **About this book**

Charger R/T has spent most of his life saving humans both from themselves and from the alien Grays. Now he must deal with Abarth, a permanently angry man who plans to destroy the rest of humanity in revenge for its imagined persecution of him. He also wants to destroy Charger R/T because he won't join Abarth's game plan. Everyone's schemes are complicated by Pennington, a religious woman who will worship any entity if it allows her to preach against science.

To further confuse matters, Abarth's crony, Jet, has discovered how to time-travel, and he sends Charger R/T bouncing through time, intervening in Gray attacks and, along the way, honoring a request to destroy heaven.

Charger R/T gradually develops the powers of a god and eventually must fight thousands of black spheres and alien Crenels. And, when the dust settles, he is surprised to discover that there are still humans who need his help. Will he do so? Or will he refuse?